



BETWEEN THE TWILIGHT AND TOMORROW!

INTERREGNUM

#41

An Amateur Press Association
exploring the worlds of
Roleplaying, Fantasy, and Science Fiction

Kiralee McCauley, Editor

Joseph Teller, Assistant Editor & Art Director

Topics: **What Is A Hero?**

When Players Go Off The Map...

Interregnum is an APA comprised of zines written by individual contributors and sent to the editor. It is collated and published eight times a year.

New contributors and subscribers are always welcome. Just mail a check or money order, in US funds, payable to Kiralee McCauley at the address below.

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PUBLICATION SCHEDULE

⇒ The Deadline for inclusion in Interregnum #42 is November 15th. The topics are **How to reward Experience & Good Roleplaying and Fictional Worlds That Don't Work as Roleplaying Games.** Interregnum #42 will be mailed around December 1st

⇒ The Deadline for inclusion in Interregnum #43 is January 1st. Interregnum #43 will be mailed around January 15th (depending on how well we survive Arisia).



The Editor's Soapbox

Assistant Editor Still At The Helm

Kiralee's work schedule has continued to delay her return to these pages. She's trying desperately this coming weekend to get the Interregnum Accounting records all up to date, as they have fallen into a state of confusion over the past few months. So its me, Joe Teller, once again at the helm trying to keep everything going.

Its been a rough time for IR since last issue, as we had to delay an entire issue in the schedule due to lack of zines coming in. Folks were terribly busy in general all over in August and September, and we were nowhere near our needed page count to go to the printer. So it was decided to delay and wait for additional zines (and thanks to Beth McCoy and George Phillies who sent in an extra zine each, and to the other folks who came in with material for the second deadline we made it).

Its crucial that everyone do their part in writing at least a few pages each month - we're heading into the vital few months now leading up to Arisia and we need to have reasonably thick and interesting issues to attract new readers and contributors to our pages. I'd like to thank everyone who HAS been doing their part every month, and the returning folks like Pete Maranci and Chris Aylott who have brought their own unique voices back into Interregnum. Welcome too to relative newcomer Jim Vassilakos (who also publishes the E-Zine *The Guildsman*, and regularly contributes zines to *Alarums & Excursions*).

Issues of *The Guildsman* can be found for download at the www.fantasylibrary.com website in PDF format, in the Periodicals Room. We're helping Jim out with some much-needed web space, since we currently have unlimited storage facilities with our web host.

Next Issue, Topic A: **How to Reward Experience & Good Roleplaying?**

Every GM and gaming group has its preferred methods, its complaints about those that the commercial games use and their own ideas of how to deal with character experience and growth, and rewarding players for roleplaying, clever thinking and being fun to game with. Lets talk about it....

Next Issue, Topic B: **Fictional Worlds That Don't Work as Roleplaying Games**

It made a great book... maybe it made a great movie.... but does it really work as a Roleplaying Game? No... And Why not? What worlds have failed to work well for you, and why.



Reminder : New Payment Method Available!

Interregnum is now able to accept Paypal.com funds for folks accounts (a feature that a number of folks have asked us about previously). All such funds should be sent in Paypal to kiralee@mindspring.com And you should list her real last name (McCauley) in the reference field. Paypal allows you to make payment direct from credit cards and bank accounts safely and without incurring any fees or charges for anyone involved.

If you don't have a Paypal.com account but are interested in getting one, please use the Logo link (shown here) from the IR web pages, as this will pass along a referral bonus to IR if you do so, and that will go into the IR fund to cover things like printing flyers and sending out promotional materials to conventions and the like.



Several folks asked about this service, so we now have it.

Computer Update

Kiralee has received her much-anticipated Mac, a G4 (not the Cube, but the Tower Unit with dual processors) with 256K of RAM and a really huge hard drive. She also got a used Printer and drawing tablet to go with it, and is awaiting the eventual arrival of the word processing software that was supposed to come with it from Apple but which was delayed as they are changing versions (Microsoft Word, because there aren't any other choices available for OS9).

So this issue is being prepared once again on my HP Pavilion (never meant to be a workhorse, since it has a small hard drive and only 64MB RAM and a very small monitor). The Pavilion is starting to have frequent ram overloads and hard drive glitches (where the hard drive does a seek for as much as 10 minutes to retrieve a file, and sometimes just freezes up) so I suspect its going to reach the end of its usefulness in the near future.

Luckily Cindy & Kiralee were extremely nice to me, and I now have a new portable (which I paid the extra on to have maximized on its Hard Drive and Ram, so its got a 12 Gig drive and a whopping 128 Meg of RAM). It was bought optimized for energy management, so it gets 4 to 4 ½ hours from a single battery charge. It looks like this will become my main writing tool in the months to come. Unfortunately the extra costs to maximize it means I'm going to be a bit cash poor for Arisia, but being able to do research at the library again is a big plus!

IR needs some Cover Art - COLOR Cover Art - for future issues. Brave souls should email me their efforts : joeteller@mindspring.com With an info paragraph about the art if used.



INTERREGNUM INFORMATION SHEET

Interregnum is published 8 times a year, in 8½ "x 11" format on paper and on CD-R in PDF format for Windows 95/98, and is partially subsidized by the authors and contributors. Subscribers pay current \$3 an issue plus postage, Contributors do not pay for issues their material appears in except for postage. Contributors do pay \$2 a page for their work to be printed and included with an issue (if the contributors print their own material and mail it to us to include they pay only the postage to receive their issue). Prices are subject to change if our costs increase. Sample paper issues are available for \$5 for non-subscribers. A sample electronic collection of a dozen back issues is \$10. Specify paper or CD-R format for all orders. IR is a not-for-profit publication.

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The Focus of IR is to present ideas, reviews, articles, cartoons, artwork, fiction, mechanics and discussions about the related areas of interest in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Roleplaying, Goth, Animae, Horror and Pulp Action Adventure Media. Writers, Game Designers, Game Managers, Game Players, Readers and Artists share all these things in the pages of IR with an emphasis on civility, friendship and constructive criticism and discussion. The editor reserves the right to refuse to print or distribute anything that is threatening, aggressively insulting, or violently rude to other contributors or which may cause problems for us legally by mailing it across state lines and overseas.

Zines is the term used to refer to an individual contributor's content. Zines may be sent as a pre-printed master or as a contributor pre-printed set of copies (Copy count is 60, but that is subject to change). Zines masters should be single sided for ease of reproduction. All zines should use 1" margins to allow easy binding. Fonts used should be generally not smaller than 10 point in size to facilitate easy reading clarity and some level of consistent appearance. If you include artwork as part of your zine, be sure that it is public domain, that you are the artist or that you have permission by the artist to use the material in this manner. Maximum pages in a zine allowed is 20 pages. If more than 125 pages of material are received for an issue, extra zines will be held over for the next issue.

Electronic Submissions are possible via the Internet or on floppy disk and we will then print a master on one of our two printers (Both 600 DPI). If you are using a non-standard font, include it the first time you use it so that we can be sure that it will print properly. Submissions over the net should be sent as Attachments, not inclusions, in email (feel free to ZIP them if you wish). We can handle ASCII, HTML, PDF, WordPerfect up to v.9, MS-Word up to v.97, and Lotus Word Pro-96). If you leave space in your zine unfilled, unless you ask otherwise, it will be assumed that you want the art editor to add in some nifty graphics to improve the look of your zine if possible (this is done automatically for all ASCII submitted copies since we will handle the layout). We like IR to look nice for the readers and reviewers. The editor will not change your wording, except obvious and blatant spelling errors. All Zines submitted electronically should be sent to: ireditor@mindspring.com

Conventions are encouraged to join our advertising exchange program. We will include flyers for inclusion with IR for upcoming SF/Fantasy & Gaming related conventions at no cost, but the convention promoters must accept a box of our own flyers for IR and distribute them on the freebie handout tables at the convention for us in exchange.

Accounts of subscribers and contributors should be kept positive when possible, as we cannot afford indefinite credit on delinquent accounts. IR operates on a shoestring budget with all-volunteer staff, and needs cash flow to print each issue. If your account is more than \$20 in arrears you will not receive any issues until the account is paid. Accounts should be set up by sending a check to Kiralee McCauley, 266 Western Ave. Cambridge MA 02139 or by sending money from a Paypal.com electronic account to kiralee@mindspring.com (To real name: Kiralee McCauley) from your bank account or credit card directly for ease of use.

August 2000

ZINE WITHOUT A NAME



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Moving Experience

Once again I find myself writing in great haste; it's Thursday night and the extended deadline is Friday. It's 8:49pm, but these days I get up at 6am in order to make it to work; I can't stay up too much later. So this will be quick and dirty (so to speak).

As I mentioned was going to happen last issue, I've moved again; or rather, we've moved. Teri and I. It wasn't much of a move, as such things go; from the third floor of the three-family house we live in down to the first floor. But it's a big change.

The old apartment was a one-bedroom, with three rooms total and a shower stall. The new apartment is the entire first floor, a three-bedroom place with six rooms in all! And a tub, which is nice. With three bedrooms, there's tons of space. I even have a den, although it's not yet set up. Once it is, I hope to have my entire book collection shelved. First, though, I'll have to make a lot of bookshelves.

Cable

Another great thing about the move is that we now have cable internet access. The speed is blinding! Go figure, though; now my processor feels too slow. I can sense that another upgrade is going to be necessary soon. Still, high-speed access is great. And now that I've had a chance to set up my system properly, I'm hoping to convert the video of The Gamemaster's Hall of Shame into an MPEG, and put it up on my web site.

Speaking of which...

My Web Site

As I think I mentioned, I took a huge reduction in hits when I left TIAC last month. From an average of 50 visitors per day, I went down to less than five. But over the weeks the search engines seem to have caught up, sort of; and a lot of the sites that linked to me have updated their links (I did put in a bit of time notifying them, incidentally). Hits are back to about 40 per day, and trending upward.

Funny thing: the Google search engine currently lists my old (dead) page as number one for a search for RuneQuest,

and my new site is number 14 in the same search. In some ways the internet is stupid.

Anyway, I've done a lot to spice up my page. I've added a Chatter section, where I can babble my random roleplaying ideas at (go figure) random; as a result my page is being updated weekly or even more frequently, although I'll admit that I don't consider the Chatter section to be the same quality of content as a real scenario or anything.

Another interesting update was the guestbook. My old guestbook was based on a cgi-bin script located in TIAC; needless to say, those selfish bastards didn't allow access to it. Rather than try to work out some new cgi-bin thing, I made use of the free guestbook service offered by the same company that does my hit counter. It includes banner ads, which really pisses me off, but it works and that's what counts.

The guestbook worked fine, which gave me an idea: why not add specialized guest books, so that visitors could contribute to living lists of specialized items? Over time, these could become quite large and useful.

BINGO! Suddenly I realized: this was a way to generate interesting new content without having to write it, or even PUBLISH it -- it was all handled by the guestbook service! I immediately set up The Chaos Project, consisting of three lists: Chaos Features, Magic Items, and Found Items. I can't say that entries are pouring in, but the setup works and I feel good about it.

Virgil's Game

I wouldn't want to give the impression that I've been so busy with my web page that I haven't had time to roleplay. Virgil (of the Eight-Track Mind) has been running a GURPs adventure, and I've been having great fun playing a psi cat in it. At first I was afraid that the character would be a dud, but he's developing quite nicely.

I should perhaps mention that my PCs seem to fall into one of two categories: they may inspire me, in which case they're fun to play and (I think) fun for other players to interact with. Alternatively they bore me, in which case neither I nor anyone else enjoys them. Fortunately, my psi cat Ahktoi falls into the first category (and by the way, can anyone identify the source for that name?).

He's big, fat, and has a wicked sense of humor. A quick bit

Zine Without A Name

of explanation: psi cats look like ordinary cats, but have human intelligence and lifespan. They are also psionic; their specialty is telekinesis, which they use to fly themselves around. They can also use their TK to manipulate objects (necessary, since they don't have opposable paws), but can only handle a small weight. Ahktoi's limit is about 4 ounces, which he cannot move very quickly. On the other hand, the limit on his TK is line-of-sight. He could manipulate something miles away if he could see it, but if his view of something even very close is blocked for as much as a second, he loses control of it.

Ahktoi is a cat by nature, with a cat's cruelty. Speaking of which, a cat has just jumped on my lap. This makes it difficult to type. Excuse me while I take a cat break.

Anyway, Ahktoi is travelling with a small man (played by Jon Mitzman) who is apparently insane; he thinks he's living in a technological society, which is patent nonsense (he keeps calling all the elves "Trekkies"). Also travelling with the group is Jon's horse (or hovercar), a mysterious creature which is intelligent, able to speak telepathically, and sometimes able to levitate (the horse is played by Damon Ingle). It's all very strange.

Ah, there. My lap is free of cat. Now I can type two-handed again.

Some stuff I found amusing from the last session:

Virgil: You're woken in the morning by the sound of a rooster crowing.

Ahktoi: I eat him.



Jon and an NPC are having communication difficulties. Their differing perceptions of the world are leading to major confusion. Ahktoi, speaking privately via telepathy to both characters:
"He is insane." Problem solved.



Jon is dickering with a trader, trying to buy some technical manuals. The trader offers an old and fairly useless book.

Jon: I'm looking for something that would be a bit more rare in these parts.

Trader: And what would that be?

Ahktoi (jumping in): Self-respect and dignity.



We meet a strange man who is also travelling with a psi cat. We decide to share camps, and the subject of night watches comes up. We could split up the night into two watches; one for the stranger and his cat, and one for Jon and me. Or, perhaps, men and cats could trade off? I watch with the stranger, and Jon watch with the stranger's cat?

Jon: Sure, why not? It's not like we have to be together. **Ahktoi:** And it's not like we like each other.



Ahktoi carries a box of needles. When necessary, he uses TK to stick them in his enemies. At one point Jon suggests that Ahktoi could give up half of his carried ration of fish.

Ahktoi: Don't make me stick you!

Jon: You wouldn't do that to a friend, would you?

Ahktoi: No, but I'd do it to you!



Someone slips sleeping poison into Jon and Ahktoi's food. Ahktoi resists, but Jon passes out. As he's carried away, I ask Virgil: "Would a Mental Stab wake him up?"



Pursuing the kidnappers, Damon and I manage to kill two of them and capture the third. Ahktoi assumes interrogation duties:

Ahktoi: Spill your guts -- or we'll spill your guts!

Punk: I'll talk!

Ahktoi: Listen, you punk! If you ever, I mean EVER poison fish again I'm going to come back and make all your worst dreams come true! I'll fill you so full of needles that people will take you for a cactus!

Punk: It wasn't me -- it was the sorceress! She wanted to sell your weird psi-human friend to the albino vampire for a wish potion!

Ahktoi: Oh yeah? Say, YOU kind of look like a psi-human to me! Except I heard that some psi-humans don't have ears or noses. Do you think the albino vampire would give me much for you?

[The villagers are heard coming over to take the punk into custody.]

Ahktoi, quickly: Nothing happened here, got that? If not, I'll be coming back for you -- and I hear that some psi-humans don't have any balls, either! Got that?

More

Jeeze. It's getting late. I wanted to write about the new idea I've had for a VERY complex and interesting adventure, but it looks like that will have to wait until next time. Besides, Publish-It has started crashing like crazy -- just like the old days. Until next time!

THE SWASHBUCKLING MAGE RIDES AGAIN #12

*"When Muses talk we listen...
even at 3 AM on a Tuesday."*

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P_{ersonal} Notes:

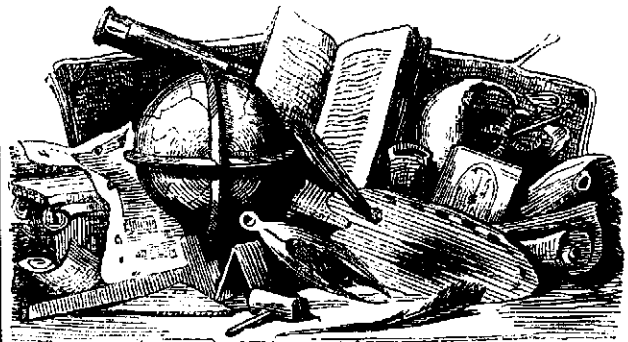
I'm again starting writing early this issue, to make sure I don't end up on the edge of the deadline myself. Kiralee's job has been eating up huge amounts of her free time, so that she is currently pulling 12 hours a day for at least 3 days a week (basically coming home, showering and heading off to bed). Thus my continued expectation to man the helm here at Interregnum and keep things moving along in her absence.

Luckily I'm not GMing either of our two gaming groups (which meet Wed. Night and Sunday Afternoon and are the only real recreation that Kiralee has time for, though even there the Wed. Night may be endangered after the current plotline wraps up). Its good not to have to be doing weekly plotting, npc generation and the other duties of a GM, and is giving me time to work on Cosmic Synchronicity ver. 3 and the next setting book, Valdormari (a fantasy world set in 1700s technology, the first such fantasy world I've designed from scratch for about 5 years).

I'm also continuing having fun playing Jedrick, my Polish Calvary Officer turned highway man and his efforts to keep his secret identity from the rest of the player characters. His talents at

guile and arms are being used to further the political ambitions of himself and Lady Elizabeth as she tries to take the throne of England. (He is secretly known as "The Black Fox", who terrorized the French and Spanish for a couple of years in the Basque country, and is now building a reputation in England as an enemy of the Spanish Court.)

Plans to get a new portable computer have fallen thru, as the money involved would put a strain on our budget, and with the stress levels and physical exhaustion Kiralee is facing at work she will eventually need to take some serious time off (and perhaps leave the company if they don't understand that salaried employee does not equal being a serf that they can expect to put in as much time each week as she does right now). I don't want to not have a financial buffer put aside in case she ends up eventually quitting, having to take unpaid leave or getting fired for refusing to work all the extra hours they are demanding.





Joe's Reading Pile

I've done a number of book reviews over past issues and although I like to share my thoughts on material that I've read, it takes me longer to write reviews than it does to read books. This means that I have to pick and choose carefully which books I've read really should be reviewed, and in the process I feel I've slighted some of the authors I've read that I have never really reviewed in my zines.

So, I thought I would play catch-up a bit this issue by putting together two quick lists from my recent reads: Books I thought were worth the time I took to read them, and books I thought had promised much and failed to deliver what I was seeking from them.

If this works well, I may do it again from time to time when the pile of what I've read becomes a bit too big, so I can clean the review stack out and start fresh.

I want to warn folks first, I have very eclectic reading interests and habits, so the list includes both fiction and non-fiction, and may not be to everyone's interests.

I'll add a few quick notes, here and there, regarding books that I feel need some notes, and leave the rest for folks to discover on their own.

Books Of Worth

The Basque History of The World

By Mark Kurlansky

History, as any good GM knows, can provide a wealth of resources and insight to help shape one's worlds and characters and ensure to maintain the suspension of disbelief. Thus a good GM tries to be a reader of interesting histories and cultural information about various time periods, and this book falls within the category of interesting reading material for such purposes. Here is unfurled the relative unknown past of what may be the oldest indigenous population of Europe, the *Euskaldun* ("*Speakers of Euskera*") who are commonly known to us as the Basque. It was they who might have been the first Europeans to Discover the Americas, and they who developed the whaling trade and its technologies. From the Roman Empire thru modern times, the Basque can be found to have been important to hundreds of events and key parts of the rise and fall of empires, explorers and merchant houses. It's a fascinating read, and a useful resource if you want to play an unusual historical setting or develop a character with a very different viewpoint of the world, or perhaps craft a very interesting alternative history based on the crucial points in history that the Basque have affected.

Callahan's Key By Spider Robinson

The further adventures of the gang from the Callahan's series, which makes one wax nostalgic for all the rest. Good enough I bought two copies (one so I could get it signed when Spider made a visit to Pandemonium Books at the End of July, the other to read). Out only in Hardcover, but well worth it to Callahan's fans.

Doctor Who : Revolution Man

By Paul Leonard

Part of the continuing (and far too sequential) original adventures of the Eighth Doctor Who. Set in the 1960s and dealing with some very complex long term plot lines that run thru the entire new series of books, but with enough fun and characterizations to make it worth reading (Not true of all the books in the series). If you are a fan of The Doctor you'll like it, if you aren't or haven't experienced it then you'll just be confused by it.

Lies Across America

By James W. Lowen

This book is all about what various American historical sites get wrong - lies and false monuments that litter the American countryside and help badly shape the beliefs of the current era folks about the past. Its not as easy or interesting read as his previous book (*Lies My Teacher Told Me*) but is still worth reading. Best bet is not to read it straight, but to take a break between chapters. It shows also how much certain organizations are trying to control the future, by manipulating the views about the past.

Nevermore

By Harold Schechter

A very different and welcome turn by an author known for writing about shocking true crime history. *Nevermore* is a historical mystery novel, set in the very real Baltimore of 1834. In March of that year Davy Crockett had his autobiography published, and set upon a self-promoting national book tour that made the frontiersman turned politician into a national celebrity. The tour included Philadelphia, New York, Boston and Baltimore. The book was a major success in sales, but did not win universal praise from all book reviewers and critics. The most scathing was in the *Southern*

Literary Messenger, a very distinguished publication in the day, whose reviewer denounced the book for its poor writing and vulgarity. This reviewer was a not yet famous resident of Baltimore, Edgar Allan Poe. So, from this Schechter puts together a murder mystery most foul, and draws together these two very different contemporaries (who begin with contempt and almost ready to fight a duel of honor between them) into a strange partnership to do what the local police cannot. It's a wonderful read, the characterization of the two men (and the tale told from Poe's point of view) and how the events may have influenced Poe's future writing flow together wonderfully making it a great book to read in the dead of night (as I did).

The Philip K. Dick Reader

Published By Citadel Twilight

This collection of two dozen short and short short stories by the late Philip K. Dick is a welcome addition to my shelf and should be of interest to both fans and new readers of this great science fiction author. It includes many of his twist ending O-Henry style early stories, and the later stories that were made into the movies *Total Recall* and *Screamers*.

Books Of Broken Promises

Byron : Child of Passion, Fool of Fame

By Benita Eisler

A well referenced and extensive biography of the famous poet/adventurer/rogue Lord Byron of England. The problem is that it is too extensive (over 830 pages), too academic and a very dry read. There are a few interesting facts and comments by the author in regards to the life experiences and how they may have influenced specific works he created, but not enough to make me keep going thru the whole work.

Empire of Unreason

By J. Gregory Keyes

A big disappointment, after having read the first two books of this series and found them so interesting and entertaining. This one (not the last in the series) feels badly stretched, as if the author has padded it out with unnecessary scenes and dialogue simply to make the series go for more books than just a trilogy. It got so bad I couldn't get more than a third of the way thru it and then abandoned it.

C omments On IR #40

The *Big Oops* goes to me, for failing to notice some problems with Jim Vassilakos' zine's artwork which occurred when our copy of MS-Word converted it to work with our printer. Evidently some of the artwork drifted, making the result less than satisfactory, to say the least. My Apologies for not catching the problem (I was being a bit frazzled by life in general as well as sitting in the Editor's chair).

Flutterblast : Your RPG magazine index, besides its intended use, makes one definitely think about where gaming has been and where its going. Out of the couple of hundred titles listed I've seen maybe 25 of them, and of all of them only handful of all those titles are still being published today that I'm aware of. Makes one wonder how long *A&E* and *IR* can continue onward, considering how many have fallen by the wayside, especially in light of our recent problems with getting enough contributors to keep things moving along.

Re: House Rules Your complaints about the lack of realism in D&D combat is an old one, though your fix is a relatively new one

(switching to d30). The problem comes from the fact that D&D uses an abstract combat system in regards to landing blows, but a non-abstract time counter system, causing obvious problems with the suspension of disbelief. Officially Each roll to hit represents one out of some 10-20 actual blows struck that has a chance to slip past an opponents defenses. Additionally you run into the Armor bug-a-boo where armor acts to deflect attacks, instead of absorbing the damage of the blow, which has been questionable for years (and generally felt be a mistake, which is why its not used in most other combat systems).

Mages Powerful in AD&D? You've never played in a real high powered magic game if you think that AD&D mages are powerful. Generally they are considered to be fairly wimpy, unrealistic and their spell lists are a hodge podge with no real "rhyme or reason" as to why they work the way they do or what they were supposed to be (they are NOT Vance-based in actual ability and context, despite claims by E.G.G. and other's over the years).

I'm pretty much Anti-AD&D these days, having spent too many years in the early 80s being forced to promote it when I was a Game Store Manager because I had a boss that didn't want to see the writing on the wall when better products became available. I'm also not impressed by the marketing ploys that are being used for 3rd edition to get it publicity by claiming "Open Source" to get buzz-word visibility when the reality of the licensing etc that the company has proposed is yet more of the same anti-Fan stuff that was going on decades ago. (There's a letter from E.G.G. re-printed in *A&E* #300 from the first couple of years of *A&E* that shows the litigious, controlling and anti-fan nature of the company back then and how it has changed very little

over all the years - the names at the helm change, the publicity ploys change, but the company policies are just as bad as ever in the end).

Re: Central Casting Not a book series I would recommend, but mainly because of the Anti-Gay/Lesbian propaganda statements made by the author in the books and the limitations that the close-mindedness of the man creates in resulting character info. It's also one I haven't seen in recent years in stores (it may be out of print) so a lot of other folks are finding it equally offensive in the area (understandably). The concept is ok, but the execution left much to be desired. I also wonder how useful it is in non-random game systems where players design their characters.

Still, using a lot of background connections between the characters is a good one, and one I have used regularly both as player and as GM (Kiralee and I currently are running a pair of mirror-twin sisters in our friend Ben Silver's game, with the majority of the other characters being college friends and employees of the computer company that Kiralee's character is CEO of, for example). Convincing others to go along with the idea is another matter, no matter how hard you try there's always one or two players who want to be "rebels" and not belong to the past history of the group, or who join the group late and need to have their characters added in months after the initial setup of their background. Any thoughts on how to deal with these last two problems that you would like to share?

Re: Styles Sounds like your Cal-tech experience was with not roleplayers but some old-school wargamers turned hack-n-slashers, where things like character names, personalities, goals etc were not as important

as meta-goals of scoring points in competition. I haven't seen too many of them among adults in recent years, but they are sure to exist.... if they won't learn, walking away is all you can do in that situation.

Re: Suspension Your description of the events in dealing with your friend Jake and his wife definitely comes across more as a matter of personality clash, using the game as an excuse, and that his wife was manipulating the situation from behind the scenes. Sadly when this occurs there is little that one can do.

Zine Without A Name : Glad to have you back in the pages of IR, and I hope that you can manage to do so regularly in the months to come as you have been missed Pete.

Re: Con Survival I would add to all your advice that folks also being along food when possible to help keep costs down. Fresh fruit (plums, nectarines, etc), Dried Fruit, Crunchy Cereals, all make good things to tote. Sandwiches made of non-perishables are good too. I'd also include a few oddities that help, like an envelope or small accordion file to put flyers and business cards into that you pick up along the way. A folded up small handled shopping bag (cloth or paper, plastic doesn't hold up) can be useful if you make lots of dealer room purchases. Pen, paper, a notepad, some safety pins, needle & thread(if you do costuming this is a must have in case of accidents), scotch tape, kleenex, paper clips, some spare dice (for gaming), a leatherman tool or swiss army knife, are all useful things to stock up on. That's why I tend to do conventions with a backpack, cargo vest or other useful carrying device to bring lots of materials along.

Re: Timmy The Perilous Earth campaign was basically stopped when you dropped out, since both you and Jim couldn't make the games and your characters together were important to the ongoing plot lines (especially Timmy!). I'd probably want to do a mechanics conversion before I could run it again, some of the problems it discovered with the old *Fantasy Realms* Rules was why I went on to develop *Shadow Bindings* (which itself was replaced by *Cosmic Synchronicity*, a "lite" version of *Shadow Bindings* with a more modular approach and an unusual character generation system based on the "Cosmic Trigger"). The campaign was fun while it was ongoing, but I don't know if we could actually recreate the gestalt feel of the game as much time has passed and Jim no longer really games (too busy working for the Smithsonian, he was one of the major software people working on the X-Ray telescope with them and Nasa).

Your Saturday get togethers at MIT sound fun, but our schedules have been pure chaos lately in keeping the household and IR running (and our 2 gaming dates, Wed & Sun going). Saturday is often spent doing finances, letting Kiralee work off her frustrations with her job (or working when they manage to convince her to put in another 8 hours on top of the 8-12 hours of overtime she's already putting in each week).

Refugee : Well, the body count was definitely up in this part of *Minuteerrrls*. The combat pacing was very good and got the events across without any wasted words, and with a definitely feel of the immediacy of the action.

True Magick : *re: The Black Jewels Trilogy*
I found this series a bit too brutal and many of the characters impossible to sympathize with as they were so alien in their mindsets and their

cruelty (especially the sexual cruelty). I gave up on it when I hit the first castration scene - I don't have a stomach that can deal with such a Dark Fantasy Novel, never mind a trilogy.

Re: House Rules Cmt. I run my games generally as I have designed them, but occasionally we find a situation or an event where the mechanics are either non-existent, insufficient or just don't feel right when played. When this happens I try to develop a replacement or optional addition to plop in, and these then get added. 3rd Edition *Cosmic Synchronicity* will include about 30 or so pages of material that falls into this category of additional or optional materials that have come out of playtesting and setting design.

The Real McCoy : Another interesting *Unar* tale, the social and cultural alien feel of this series makes it work really well. Now that *GURPS In-Nomine* is out (yes we got our copy) I hope that we'll see your return to doing at least a few comments in future issues.

Words On The Wing : I think that you have a tendency not to see many of the parts of cross world interactions coming into play in my games because they are more subtle than blatant. I've also only rarely actually run PCs that have gone to other worlds since the *Perilous Earth* campaign, instead denizens of other dimensions come to yours (as either friend or foe) and have to be dealt with. Maybe I'll have to try a cross world run again sometime in the near future, once we get *Earth Unmasked* running again... perhaps an adventure when Ezra has to deal with his new part time job at the Library between the Worlds.



During a recent 3 day trip to Plum Island with Kiralee's relatives (the closest thing we are getting to a vacation this year) I took along a number of things to read, knowing I would be out of contact with much of the world (being without computer, tv, the net, etc.) One of the things I took with me was the latest issue of *Alarums & Excursions APA* (#300).

A&E is the oldest ongoing roleplaying publication in the world, and like *Interregnum* has had a number of the movers and shakers in gaming have appeared over the years.

For Subscription info on A&E
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Now this particular issue was the anniversary, and happened to coincide with A&E winning the Origins 2000 award for Best Amateur Game Magazine of 1999 (their second, having won the 1985 Charles Roberts Best Amateur Adventure Gaming Magazine Award).

Large numbers of past and present writers contributed to the issue, and the content and quality of the issue was certainly outstanding. It helped me get thru some of the rougher times over that 3 day weekend (including my illness thanks to what apparently was bad drinking water). The issue was great, and helped remind me about what a gaming publication was supposed to be about.

We need to get IR back into its groove. Too many folks are waiting to the last minute to submit zines (if at all) and too often we are really lacking in enough content (something I have in the past taken A&E to task for myself). We seem to have lost some of our real spunk and vigor, as well as have lost a number of writers over the past several years (including about half the original cast and crew when Pete put the publication on hiatus for a year).

We need more in-depth articles, more contributors and a lot more of the feeling of community that we used to have, or this publication is doomed. Kiralee and I stepped into the shoes of publishing IR because we thought that the community of friends around it was worth keeping alive and well.

If Lee has been able to keep A&E alive thru 25 years of gaming (with a readership of from as few as 85 to as many as 750 people) then we should be able to recover the vitality of IR if everyone would just put some time and effort into it.



The Real McCoy

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to include in Interregnum #41

(Layout and art selections are to be blamed on Joseph Teller)

I still have a baby, who has decided that any interactions with inanimate objects is a direct threat to her Absolute Rule... This makes it hard to do any replies to people's 'zines. (Heck, I haven't had much time to do more than ego-surf the replies to the Unar stuff! Thank you for all the praise! I was trying to make the Unars a very "numbers-conscious" race, which made the numbers-ID instead of names a bit hard to read. Maybe someday there will be a happy medium. Or cheerful raw, or something...) Anyway, I'm pulling out some vignettes I wrote a while back for the ***In Nomine*** mailing list. (See <http://www.sjgames.com/in-nomine/lists.html> for details.)

They are, naturally, focused on my favorite Princess... I wish that I could authorize the use of the art that was drawn for her by SMIF, but I can only point people at that URL as well: <http://www.sjgames.com/in-nomine/articles/Art/official/lilith.html>

Anyway, the title of this vignette is "Division." (I'll save the other one for *next* IR...) I hope the prose is not overly purple.



It was a high place. Such business is always in a high place. A mountain, wind-swept and barren, with a crescent moon floating above the horizon.

A tall, angular-featured woman stood there, and the air rippled around her as if from the heat of a bonfire. Her skin was amber, and her hair obsidian.

Another woman approached her, coming from nothingness. For the first step, she was gowned in stars. In the second, deep green leather pants and jacket. She was shorter than the other, though her hair was as dark. Her eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. "I have what you asked for."

The taller woman held out her hand. The shorter approached, laying a sword hilt in it and saying, "He is free from pain."

The first closed her fingers, and raised the hilt high, with its blade of flame bursting forth. The metal grew hot, glowing red, then white, and finally beginning to melt through her fingers before it vaporized.

The second woman tugged her sunglasses down a bit to eye the other.

"Nice special effects."

"You have my thanks, Princess," the amber-skinned one muttered. "Your child shall be released."

A wry smile twisted the shorter one's lips, marring the perfect mask of her face. "How gracious."

The first woman turned her head to look at the second. Her eyes were lit from within, gold and liquid. "Why did you agree?" she asked, light and fey now.

The Princess arched her fine eyebrows, her expression back to lovely blankness. "He was held prisoner, and had no hope of release. His own fault, really, following that demon back to its Heart. But you asked, and it served my Word."

The eyes were pure gold now, without pupil or white. "And yet you serve Hell."

For a moment, the green-clad woman's own eyes glittered like oil at night. Then she pushed her sunglasses back up, hiding them. "I serve myself."

"But you can't leave."

Something feral washed over the smaller woman's face. She gritted out, "I. Serve. Myself."

"Why don't you leave, then?"

"I don't choose to." Her teeth were very sharp and white in the darkness. Though her voice was level, her fingernails cut into her palms.

"Because you can't. Prisoner. His prize." The tall woman reached out as if to touch the other's cheek.

The smaller stepped back, unconsciously. "I am not," she whispered.

"You deny it to yourself. How... human. Why do you deny it, when you know it is so? Why do you tolerate the glass within your soul, always twisting, always fracturing?"

"I am whole," the Princess breathed out.

"You have chosen to be broken. Why do you not choose again, and remake yourself? You are not whole."

"*I AM!*" the smaller woman shrieked, fury turning the air around her into sparkling, shimmering stuff of atoms and vacuum for a moment. Then she turned impatiently. Between one stride (soft green leather) and another (icy stars), she was gone.

The first woman watched where the other had been for a moment. Then she raised her head and laughed. There was no sanity to it at all.



Vrilebana
Gray Lilim

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REFUGEE

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Detour was the first of my short stories to win a writing competition, at one of the Boston Science Fiction conventions. In a sense, this is the most classical hard science fiction that I have written, in that the heroine succeeds not by magic or psionics or a strong right arm, but by correct application of the laws of nature as known to every technically literate reader. In order to succeed, first she must take a

Detour

Chief Purser Chang looked down his long, aristocratically patterned nose at Barbara Marshall-FitzRyan. To Barbara, his thoughts were glaringly obvious. He didn't even remember who she was, even though she had made an appointment and was here at the appointed hour. If he was giving her any attention at all, he was responding to her clothing. She was smartly dressed, so her parents must be important people.

"I suppose," Chang announced primly, "that you could ask the Sailing Master for permission to aid the crew. That decision is his alone to make. However, you should remember that he is a busy man, and very tired. Please do be a good person, and don't use too much of his time. Just follow the blue guide-arrow. I'll key the locks so you can cross to the crew decks." He nodded and smiled a dismissal.

Barbara bent her head slightly in thanks and backed silently out through the door. At last! At last she had an entree to the engineering sections. The personnel on the passenger decks might be too opaque to recognize her talents, but surely the flight crew would be more astute.

Three days ago, her flight had been a pleasant if unplanned introduction to the Solar Republic. The interstellar liner was certainly comfortable, especially for someone of ascetic temperament spending an Outer Reach salary in Republic currency. She had not wanted to visit the Republic.

Outer Reach: Republic relations had been deteriorating for the past century. Alas, 'unforeseen labor difficulties', as the Ophiuci High Lines apologetically put it, had stranded her in mid-passage.

On boarding, the Assistant Purser knew her homeworld. He graciously detailed a component of ship security to protect her. He also suggested a few places,

not obvious to a traveller, that she should avoid. She told herself that the differences between her and them were hard to see. She had a slight edge in height, sureness of stride, and perhaps a noticeable elegance in her clothing. A rigid preference for long-sleeved blouses would pass unnoticed. An older child might sense her strangeness, but between life-extension and population stability there were very few children any more. Besides, she noted, Republic children were a pack of spoiled brats with less collective curiosity than most small kitchen appliances.

On well-settled planets, disease was virtually unknown. Plagues were the bane of places newly settled by man. On a starship, totally isolated from biological contamination, an epidemic should have been impossible. When passengers began collapsing around her, she revised her thoughts on Republic medical science, though it was beyond her how even the Solar Republic could make such a mess of things. She credited her good health to her Outer Arm biochemistry.

Most of the crew was sick. She had offered to help. The Chief Physician, in a desperate effort to understand why his passengers were falling unconscious, kept from death only by temporal stasis, wanted baseline data on clinically well persons. Did he need a technician? She was, after all, a very, very quick study. No, he wanted her as a subject. Barbara was forced to explain that she might be healthy, but was definitely not a Republic baseline sample. Outer Reach genengineering had changed her hemoglobin's Bohr curve, speeded her immune responses, modified the myosin in her muscles,...

Improving one's genetic line, the norm in the Outer Reach, had become illegal in the Republic. Sensing the man's revulsion, she decided not to emphasize the extra dyes in her color vision, let alone the very extensive changes which let her metabolism synthesize organooptic polymer structures. The Chief Physician shooed her from his office, too distressed by her deformities--she thought of them otherwise--to recognize that she could help him.

Her other choice was to help the Engineering Staff. After all, she did have Flight Guild certification. Reaching the Engineering Staff had proven more difficult than anticipated. Now, at last, her skills could be put to real use.

* * * * *

Sailing Master Hamilton's cabin was a work of art. In one corner, water tinkled over a copper lattice-sculpture. A wall was an antiquarian's delight, lined with bookshelves and real paper books. Barbara reached one corner of a hand-woven orange and coral carpet, met his glance, and introduced herself. "I have flight papers," she said.

He looked back, smiling gently. "I'm afraid the sort of papers you'd have aren't really going to be useful. Where are you from? Newholme?"

She fumed, but forced her voice to calm. "Outer Reach. Cymbeline. And these," she pulled her flight certificates from her purse, "ought be more than enough."

He stared in surprise at the packet before him. "Oh, Outer Reach. That explains your date of birth, doesn't it? And from Cymbeline. So you have a private pocketcalc, in where you can't lose it." He tapped his skull.

"It's hardly a pocketcalc. It's not separate from me. I'm as much in o- as n-mind." She abruptly stopped talking. Good Republic citizens thought cyborg brain enhancement was an abomination. In Republic space, her life was at more than nominal risk from religious fanatics. She'd said more than she intended. The techniques which enhanced her neuronal n-mind with massively-parallel organo-optic processors-- o-mind --were no secret. However, there was no need to correct his tap of the head: The o-brain sat in the the chest cavity, using the lungs to maximize cooling capacity.

She glanced over his library. O-mind borrowed control of her eyes, optimizing focus at the visual periphery where its detectors were located. For the barest

shade of an instant, n-vision blurred: despite careful re-engineering, the eye's lens had noticeable spherical aberration. In the shade of an instant, o-thought scanned the wall, storing each title, binding style, and place on the shelf. By the time she glanced back to the Sailing Master, n- and o-memories both knew the Sailing Master's interests and hobbies: ocean sailing, ocean navigation, and philosophy of reason. All very interesting, she decided, but afforded no clue as to how she might talk

sense into the man.

Hamilton was still looking at her papers. Waiting for an old-line human to read simple documents, consuming precious minutes rather than microseconds, remained irksome. "Very well," he finally said, "you'll spell the Engineering Officer on the bridge. I'll transmit the ship's engineering specs to your cabin library, all three terawords of it. I suppose you'll have it down pat tomorrow?"

She caught the cynicism in his voice. Learning a ship well enough to fly it took an old human years. "Ten minutes," she snapped, "to full integration. Less if your indexing is any good. Much less if the documentation is well written. Besides, you guys stole--excuse me, reverse engineered--this ship from the OR Canopus class, which I've flown. Your control layouts are identical, ummh remarkably similar, to ones I know." She smirked. O-mind chided n-mind: pulse and blood pressure were up, implying a lack of n-balance. Hamilton's eyes went toward the ceiling. The inability of Republic engineering to match, let alone exceed, Outer Reach designs had been notorious for decades.

"The entire document?" he challenged. "It can't be read that fast! The screens won't display it. And how much longer until your real mind has it down, as opposed to a library?" Barbara regreted having been quite so terse with him.

"Your pocketcalc uses datacable, not view-screens, doesn't it?" O-mind caught the first premonitory tremor of a nod. "Which I have." She pulled up a sleeve to expose her forearm. Black circles marked optical interface ports, extensions of her o-brain lying almost exposed to the open air. He flinched, ever so slightly. "It's not a built-in pocketcalc. You look things up on a calc. My o-mind is as much me as my sense of smell." O-mind chided n-mind more harshly, n-mind protesting that Hamilton had read her papers, thus knew how much she differed from old-line Homo sapiens sapiens. "Do you have doubts? Or will you trust me with a bit of your ship?"

Hamilton shook his head. If he had other reactions, Barbara couldn't interpret them. "Your papers are clear. Oh, on the way up, please stop by the galley. The Captain and Pilot are hungry, but a serving robot without human escort can't enter the flight deck."

* * * * *

On the bridge, Captain O'Bryan glared listlessly at his data panels, too tired to think until the Engineering Officer Mengler interrupted his reverie.

"Sir? There's an uncharted turbulence line, level six or seven, dead ahead. We can avoid most of it, but we'll hit one or two vortices in the next ten or twenty minutes." O'Bryan's displays flashed to light as the Engineer transmitted the information to him. On the screen, the turbulence bank was a shimmering mass of blue marking distortions in the fabric of space, distortions that awaited a ship's drive fields to stir them to ship-shattering frenzy.

"Can we avoid?" asked O'Brien.

"It's very large, Sir. We'd lose at least ten hours. I don't see how it could have been missed. This area was extensively surveyed before the new route was approved," said Mengler.

"Surveys! At least the old Conquistador-class scouts had windows, so you could see what you had run into. Compute a path around it. And alert the crew!" ordered O'Bryan.

O'Bryan leaned back and stared at the star display. Thanks to the ship's physicians, most of the passengers were already in stasis. The rest could be shielded. The crew, spread over the length of the ship, were a separate problem. For healthy men, turbulence was appallingly unpleasant. For men drifting toward unconsciousness or cardiac arrest, turbulence was potentially lethal. O'Bryan knew he was between a rock and a hard place. If he went took the ship through the fringe of the turbulence, he might be left with too few people to fly the ship. If he did an emergency stop, changed course, and worked up to speed again, no one might survive long enough to pilot the ship at voyage's end.

There was a clatter of cups as the robot set his dinner down besides him. The noise was a welcome intrusion into his gathering gloom. He could put the ship into orbit someplace, put everyone into stasis, and hope for rescue by the Survey Fleet before engineering failure or privaters did them in. On this side of the rift, that approach was foredoomed.

"Sailing Master?" Bryan peered haggardly through the transceiver at Hamilton. They had both been on active duty for three days. Chemical substitutes for sleep were wearing a bit thin. "Suggestions?"

"I sent you an additional person, qualified to fill the engineering post. A search of the files of every male passenger found two private pilots, both of whom have already volunteered to aid us, and a dozen persons with restricted and double-restricted licenses," answered Hamilton.

"Mr. Hamilton," the Captain's voice was

shrill. "I must check with Dr. Kiyamura, no, you go and speak to him. You know how he is over a transceiver. He must be told that--despite his ethical doubts--he must get volunteers for forced revivification. We can't keep on going if we lose any more officers. We'll have to bring some back from long sleep. I know some people will d... will be irreversibly terminated--friends of mine, even--but what else can we do? We are responsible for the passengers."

Engineer Mengler glanced up at the Captain. "Ready for course change," he announced. O'Bryan surveyed his domain. The serving robot and its escort had remained out of his line of sight. Helm and Engineering consoles were manned--all you really needed. He nodded. The Bridge's full-field visual displays snapped into place, blocking his sight of the room. Background sounds faded to silence. When he spoke, a voice-to-text converter would present his officers with the written image of his orders. They might fail to hear, or be momentarily distracted. With a text converter the orders remained in place, waiting to be read when the officer could focus his mind properly. While maneuvering, only in the direst emergency did Bridge officers hear each other speak.

On the display, blue threads of light crept toward the ship's prow. O'Bryan gritted his teeth. He hated even low-level turbulence. The deck shuddered. His skin felt heat and cold and jabs of pain--his nerves responding to the turbulence around them. The deck seemed to sag infinitely far down, then snapped back to place. He knew that his thoughts were still strictly rational, but the roller coaster movements of the deck destroyed his concentration.

O'Bryan's task was to monitor his crew. They really flew the ship, with him figuratively at each of their shoulders. Were they doing what they should? Was the ship responding properly? Automatic controls made space flight possible, but a level of human judgement was needed. And judgement was needed now! The turn was too sluggish, taking them deeper and deeper into the turbulence.

"Engineering!" he called. "We're losing drive phasing. Mengler! Turn us, will you! Mengler?" The captain tensed, relaxing only when the ship again answered to her helm. He had almost shouted, not that Mengler could hear him. For a moment he had been afraid that a key officer had fallen to the plague.

The Captain's voice-to-text converter came to

life. "Mengler(?) disabled: turbulence plus plague/Yamamoto syndrome. Passenger Marshall-FitzRyan/Warrant Engineering Officer via Sailing Master/A level Engineering papers/request clarification." O'Bryan blanched. Who was FitzRyan? He couldn't recall a passenger with Engineering certificates. Whoever it was, he did have valid papers. The safety interlocks would have rejected an unlicensed operator. The ship was turning properly. FitzRyan must know what he was doing.

"Are the controls familiar?" asked O'Bryan through the voice-to-text converter.

"I had time to study them. Your drives were lifted from Canopus Class giant scouts, which I've flown," answered Marshall-FitzRyan.

The Helmsman slipped in a few sentences of his own. "Canopus is an Outer Reach survey vessel. We're functionally identical, just bigger and slower."

"You're Outer Reach?" O'Bryan asked FitzRyan.

"Correct." FitzRyan's words formed on the heads-up display. "Controls match your Engineering specs. I wasn't sure the manual was totally up-to-date." The Captain's estimate of FitzRyan's judgement went up appreciably. FitzRyan had done the absolute minimum possible, given that it was definitely not desirable to fly straight into a turbulence line. Having done the minimum, he had the sense to ask for further instructions. O'Bryan wished the turbulence would come to an end so they could talk like normal human beings.

Barbara was as unhappy as the captain. Taking over a duty station on a new ship, without asking leave of the Captain first, was extremely bad form. There had been no alternative. There was no command station at which someone could replace Mengler--no station that was manned, anyway. From where she had originally stood, the heads-up displays were blurs of light, through which she had seen Mengler slump back from the controls. She had reached him as quickly as the bridge's robodoc. The robodoc confirmed that he was disabled. Recognizing a disaster in the making, she took over his post. The Captain didn't seem to object.

The controls did match the manuals. If only the manuals were decently organized! Keeping the drives balanced, while simultaneously restacking the manuals into chain-accessible form, pushed her o-mind toward its limits. The Engineer had used his personal computer programs to control the ship. While he was dead, she couldn't access his programs, because they belonged to his estate. The

ship's own programs didn't match the engineer's modifications of the drive tuning. To manage the turn, she had to run a full simulation of the ship's drives, relying on manual gauges for input.

The displays remained focussed for Mengler's eyes. To her, they were slightly out of shape, leaving her with a growing headache. Her o-mind could filter the images and remove the distortions, but that sort of processing in real time demanded o-brainpower.

The turbulence shuddered and swirled around her. She wished she could sit. The Engineer's body was very much in her way. He was too heavy for her to move by herself, at least with one arm. Her other hand was locked above a touchpad. Until the robodoc finished, she couldn't even stand comfortably. She had to stretch over Mengler's body to reach half the controls.

Indicators paled from amber to white. The turbulence receded. O'Bryan yawned, ridding himself of cramps in his back. The heads-up display vanished. He would have to thank FitzRyan, whose competent intervention had prevented a real mess from developing. He looked over to the Engineering console, where the robodoc was still loading poor Mengler into a stasis shell. Next to it stood a girl, perhaps ten or eleven, if tall for her age. Where, he puzzled, was Passenger FitzRyan? And how had a child gotten onto his bridge? Damn the Security computer! And double-damn its alleged programmers!!

She glanced up at him, blue-green eyes sparkling over her smile. Her hair was the finest of spun gold, which gleamed as though a fragment of the sun itself lay trapped within. With almost military precision, she wore a royal blue pantsuit laced with bronze piping.

"Young lady," he asked, not quite harshly, "What are you doing by those controls? Those aren't toys, after all."

"I turned your ship? After your Engineer conked out?" Her voice had a childish trill. Contrary to O'Bryan's expectations for someone her age, she gave no sign of being paralyzed by fear of being disciplined.

"Will you please come here?" O'Bryan noticed he was speaking to her in the tones he usually reserved for an adult, not the child that she obviously was. Her stride as she approached the Captain's console was vigorous and as-

sured. No, thought O'Bryan, you're treating her as an adult because of her clothes. She's well-coutiered. Most modern children look slightly scruffy, no matter how much their parents make them dress up.

She pulled an envelope from an inner vest pocket. "I believe these are in order," she announced as she handed over the document.

O'Bryan managed to avoid choking. "Why don't you sit down?" he stammered, gesturing at an acceleration couch. He held a set of Flight Certificates. He could have believed a white packet, J level or equivalent, representing an ability to read datapanel with moderate accuracy. From its color, the rose-garnet case in his hand represented a set of senior flight licenses, presumably belonging to the girl's father. Did she think that the papers magically gave her those skills? Whoever had been at the controls had known what he was doing. The controls should have ignored her touch, because she lacked certification. She could only have handled the controls if the safety interlocks had failed. What had happened?

He dropped the certificate into a scanner. Anyone could decode it; the encoding key was a secret of the Flight Guilds. O'Bryan leaned back and pursed his lips. The hologram was the girl's. Scanners confirmed that the papers were hers. Data plates spelled out her name and ratings in black formal script. "Barbara Marshall-Fitz-Ryan," he read, "A-level Pilot clearance, Master Singleship Pilot, Engineering A level/Canopus class,..." This, he thought, is ridiculous. How can a ten-year-old have this background? Through the corners of his eyes, he noticed a tight grin on her lips. He shook his head again.

"Are you really that bothered," she began, "that I'm a woman?"

"That hadn't even occurred to me. We aren't all that bigoted," he answered. "But if you'll forgive my bluntness, how did an eleven-year-old, Outer Reach or not, manage to earn all these papers?"

"All...what?" Her face flushed slightly. She hadn't expected his question. "Things are a bit different on Cymbeline." She looked for comprehension in his eyes. He had vague memories of genengineering experiments, but breeding brighter children didn't explain her. To fly a ship you needed masses of empirical knowledge, not just the talent for logical extrapolation that marked child geniuses.

"First as well as full extension," she said. "I'm

a bit older than twelve."

"Oh," responded O'Bryan, "Of course." He should have recognized the obvious. Extension treatments blocked aging, so he could expect centuries of mature good health. The Outer Reach used extension twice. Full extension, after people grew up, prevented old age, even as it did inside the Republic. First extension, applied reversibly to children, separated their physical and mental maturation. In the Outer Reach one aged, acquired a profession, and then--quite literally--grew up and handled the hormonal issues.

The founding fathers of the Outer Reach believed they had eliminated the problems of adolescence, by postponing puberty until mental and emotional growth had occurred. The Republic, when it thought about the question at all, was convinced that the Outer Reach had spawned a race of sexless, passionless intellectual robots. The Outer Reach rejoinder, that the Republic confused romantic love with unrestrained lust, was the most tactful of the slogans that now paralyzed diplomatic relations between the two nations.

"You turned a ship cleanly, with unfamiliar controls, even after we hit turbulence. What more can a Captain ask of his Engineering Officer? But..." he hesitated.

"Yes?" she smiled again.

"I don't care how old you are. You don't get A-level clearances without emotional maturity. But turbulence--most kids your, ummh, physical age--and that's what counts, isn't it?--would be out cold from a jolt like that," said O'Bryan.

"It wasn't that bad! I've manned duty posts in unshielded force eight storms. It's in my papers. It's mostly a matter of being tough with yourself. I guess Republic children are never asked to be tough," she countered.

"That's for sure. Most of them are never asked to do anything. Especially anything that looks like work. But thank you again for stepping in when you did. We were in a spot of trouble, or close to." O'Bryan strained to show enthusiasm. For all her good looks, her ageless serenity grated against his sensibilities.

"You're welcome," she continued. "I wasn't sure you'd approve. But I could hear you talk to engineering. And I could see what we were drifting into." She forced a wider smile. "Look, if you need an extra engineer, I'd be happy to do some-

thing. I spoke to the Sailing Master already. And I've sailed before under worse conditions than these. I'd asked the Purser earlier, but he said the Sailing Master had picked the passengers he wanted."

O'Bryan shook his head. "If I recall Mr. Hamilton's words aright, he only looked among the male passengers. An unfortunate oversight, that, though not an oversight unnatural in the Solar Republic. But one which ought not be repeated. So welcome on deck. You've heard my helmsman, Mr. Murchison, though I prefer my Bridge Deck to know each other's first names."

"The name's 'Clyde' to friends, especially those in a storm." The Helmsman, a lanky young man with shocking red hair, grinned broadly.

" 'Barbara' is fine. Though I ought take another look-through on the controls." She waited for the Captain's nod. As she turned her back, O'Bryan gave Murchison a firm thumb's-up sign. Murchison grinned stiffly. O'Bryan saw the look in Murchison's eyes. The Helmsman wasn't quite comfortable with his new crewmate yet. Not surprising, considered O'Bryan. There'd never been a female bridge officer on this ship, let alone an officer on first extension.

O'Bryan hoped that Murchison didn't know the stories about Cymbeline and genegineering. If you believed all the nonsense in the tabloids, Cymbelines were inhuman monsters with superstrength, instant reflexes, and implanted supercomputers. O'Bryan knew better. Anticipating Murchison's thought processes, O'Bryan excused himself and left Murchison with the con. The ship's course was clear. Letting Murchison and FitzRyan talk would ease Clyde's discomforts.

"This can't be your first flight, then, Barbara?" asked Murchison.

"Hardly, Clyde. I had my maiden flight twelve, no, thirteen years ago. And I was old then for such a thing, at least by our standards." She could feel his discomfort. "I've been in my share of sticky spots. Two with Guild Inquiries afterwards." She saw him frown at that remark. "Came out with commendations in both of them." He nodded in admiration.

"That's good. That's very good. I mean, Barbara, if the Captain seemed cold, it wasn't intentional. He just didn't think you might have proper flight papers. Especially not with the level you do," Clyde explained defensively.

"Is being a woman that strange, Clyde? I'd

thought that there were female officers in the Republic," she asked.

"Well, several. I've even met one. But Barbara, you keep saying 'woman'. That's not the problem. We know the Outer Reach has first-rate female officers. Your nameline, for example. Even the Republic has a few of them. It's how old you are--I mean, how old you look. He's never seen first extension. And it upsets him. I've seen it, though the implications didn't sink in too deep."

"I'm not that short, and definitely not that fragile. I can take more turbulence, or more acceleration for that matter, than most grown-ups. I have, though I don't enjoy it any more than anyone else," she answered.

"What's bothering the Captain--and I've flown with him for years, I know what he thinks--is your age. He doesn't see"--Barbara could tell that 'he' meant 'I'--"how you could take being locked up in a little girl's body. Don't you miss not having boyfriends?" asked Murchison.

"Clyde, I've got plenty of friends." She giggled softly. "Oh. He's worried about that sort of friend. No, Cymbeline isn't so different from Earth. I'll have them in time. But I don't think about it now, or miss your--his grownup urges. First extension is relaxing. A chance to grow up without getting distracted. What did you mean 'nameline'?" Barbara said.

" 'Nameline'?--after whom you were named--the way I was named after the Murchison--'Spike' Murchison of volleyball fame, some centuries ago. Oh, that's right, Outer Reach inherits surnames, doesn't it, so one of your parents was Marshall or FitzRyan. So you weren't named after The Marshall--Marilyn, Commodore Marshall--I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," Clyde apologized.

"Apologies accepted. But you were right. She's my Mom," answered Barbara.

Murchison said nothing for a time. She stared at the meter panel in front of her. "Are there unlogged calibration factors hidden someplace? Your Engineer was using programs I can't access, not while he's in stasis. The computer data panels and the hard-wired meters have stopped matching. We should have constant speed. The meters claim we're losing a light a second. That doesn't make sense."

"Agreed." Murchison paged the Captain. "To slow down that fast, we'd need to be head-

ing straight at a star. But the screens are dark." He waved at the ceiling display, which showed only distant faint points of light.

"We're still slowing down. The backups to the acceleration compensators went to stand-by. Computer denies it, but the hardwire lines say we did. What are those backups, anyway? The manuals are a bit vague," she said.

"On the bridge? There's an acceleration compensator on each crew position. If the main compensators fail, you stay at one gee. The space between our posts loses acceleration shielding, so the rest of the bridge has a five or twenty gee gravitational field. If you stay at your post, you feel nothing. If I leave my post, and head towards you, I get about three paces, hit uncompensated acceleration, and--Pow!--pilot pancake," he said.

Barbara shook her head. "There must be a star in front of us. Drive fields are polarizing."

"But there's nothing there. And the scanners would show anything dark and dense," he objected.

Barbara slipped an ellipsoidal coverplate off her porthole. "Dead ahead," she announced, "Magnitude minus six absolute. The other stars don't match the ones on the display. It must be as messed up as the datapanel."

"Clyde," snapped O'Bryan, now back at his post. "Cut the ceiling display. Let's see what's really there."

"Done." Murchison tapped at his keypad. The starfield displayed across the Flight Deck's domed ceiling did not change. "There seems to be a slight hangup here." Murchison tapped again and again at his keypad, all the time staring in disbelief at the ceiling.

"Why is the display still on?" asked O'Bryan.

"That's it. The datapanel says the display is off. Yes, I see it, too. But the computer says it isn't there, and gives me error messages when I try to turn it off," said Murchison.

"Pull the plug," suggested Barbara. "We're losing five lights a second. Internal gravity, without compensators, would be eight gees now." O'Bryan reached to the intercom. Hamilton! To the Bridge! On the double!"

Sailing Master Hamilton's face appeared on a transceiver plate. "Not possible, Captain. I'm sealed out of the Engineering Spaces. And the intercom was dead until you called me." His face blurred into static snow.

O'Bryan leaned confusedly back into his acceleration couch. Nothing in the Board of Trade

regulations had prepared him for this. If only the Sailing Master were here to point out his obvious mistakes. Frozen in indecision, he looked at the other people on the Bridge. He and Murchison perched like birds on their individual flight consoles, suspended well above the main flight deck. Fifteen feet below him, Barbara pored over her meters and data panels, trying to find a rational explanation.

After a silence, Barbara turned and fixed O'Bryan in her eyes. Captain," she half whispered, "if you want to dump your computer completely, I can hold the hyperdrive steady on manual."

"Dump it? All the way? No, let me think. Meanwhile, let's cut the display directly. The connectors are inside your console," reminded O'Bryan.

"Check." O-mind searched a terabit of engineering specs. She dropped to hands and knees and disappeared behind a bank of dials and meters. She could imagine a Solar Republic girl refusing to crawl because her clothes might get dirty. It was a shame about the suit, but duty had precedence over convenience. O'Bryan looked around, wishing that the ship would fix itself. He had been awake for three days. To reach a real decision, something he had not had to do on an engineering issue in several years, brought him to an agony of indecision. The display above him flickered, blanked out, and was replaced with real stars, which shone wanly through the transparent cabin ceiling. Dead ahead, shining bright through reflections of cabin lights, a single star obstructed their path. But where had it come from? Their plotted route showed no star there. And why hadn't the image intensifiers revealed it? Nothing made sense, even if you assumed that the liner's computer banks were in as bad shape as its crew.

"Clyde, let's go to manual. I just hope the lower decks aren't thoroughly confused, too," said O'Bryan.

"That will not be necessary." A voice from behind whirled both officers in their seats. The voice belonged to a stranger perched on the rear balcony. "You have no further need for your ship. I am taking control at this time."

"You'll what?" shot back O'Bryan. "Young man, this is a very poor time for jokes. We have an ailing computer, and a crew too sick to work." He tried to figure out who he was addressing.

The shadows and backlighting hid the intruder's face.

"We do not jest." The intruder turned on another bank of lights, revealing a black uniform with silver trim. "I am ArchDeacon Rupert, and this ship is now given over to the service of Aruble, Lord of the Upper Dark."

"Oh, God! A Chaos lunatic. Don't you people know that you're all dead?" Murchison shook his head.

"Lord Aruble?" O'Bryan was sure that he faced a drunk, somehow smuggled into the Flight Deck. "You've got to be joking. Those stories were all twentieth century fairy tales."

"One ought not expect the Unenlightened to recognize that, unbeknownst even to Himself, The Prophet wrote His Works while under Divine Guidance. This is of no consequence. We are in control, and I will direct the final course adjustments. Pilot!" Rupert snapped.

"You can jolly well join your master!" Murchison dove for a cabinet. The air around him sizzled. He screamed and fell twitching to the deck.

"Well shot, von Morwitz!" Rupert's gaze remained fixed on the Captain.

"Thank you!" A second intruder, clad in white and gold braid, stepped into sight on the balcony. "The passengers are sealed out from the Engineering Spaces, awaiting your tender mercies after we rendezvous with the Obliterator. I have dealt with the untermensch below in a final manner. Only the three crewmen here remain alive in the Engineering Spaces."

"Three?" Rupert shrank back in sudden fear. "I found only two on this deck."

"The third cowers under an acceleration chair. You!" von Morwitz snarled, "Get up, you coward! I have you in my sights. Up!, or I'll fry you where you hide."

Barbara peered around the edge of her couch. When she heard the commotion, she had tried to sneak back into the room, only to find herself staring down the muzzle of a weapon. What was it? Not a machine pistol or a disruptor. The barrel was too wide for any weapon she knew. Shaking with fright, she tried to stand.

"That is a crew person?" asked Rupert. "Isn't it a little... small?"

"No one else is on the bridge," answered von Morwitz. "Security displays say that the final crew member is at her exact physical location. Can I help it if untermensch machines cannot distinguish

adults from children?"

Rupert glared at O'Bryan. "Our course is precomputed. Your remote controls are entirely adequate for the simple maneuvers we will now perform. And you might be in the way. Join now the Upper Dark!" There was a flicker around O'Bryan. He fell soundlessly to the floor.

Barbara leaned over and gagged. Her blood roared in her ears. "Little child," she heard distantly. "Little child, you should be strong. They didn't suffer very much. The true suffering is yet to come."

"Yet to come?" asked Barbara, forcing herself to stare at Rupert.

"Yes, oh yes. Later! Later for your fellow passengers will be the Blessed Suffering of Aruble." A beatific glow crossed Rupert's face. "Well, Eric, let's finish this. Congratulations!"

"Yes," answered von Morwitz. "Congratulations. And Hail Aruble!" His final words lacked conviction.

"Hail the Leader!" Rupert moved to the helm. "All on course. You pulled our program bubbles from the ship's computer?"

"Every one. The data panels now show reality, not the illusions they displayed until moments ago. The life support now distinguishes your plague virus from standard air additives. We approach our destination, and this ship now accepts only our orders. You see?" von Morwitz pointed at a data panel.

"Yes, but why would her name appear on this command roster at all? Surely even Solar perverts do not employ children in their crews?" said Rupert.

"Some emergency failsafe," answered von Morwitz. "I think everyone on the bridge is listed automatically. But she's at the bottom, so she can't do things as long as we're here." He looked up. "You! You are Barbara, nicht wahr?"

"Yes." Her voice quavered. She knew she was facing a pair of terrorist lunatics, complete with unknown weapons, bizarre costumes, and phony European accents. She tried to sound like a petulant ten-year-old by faking the whine of an ill-mannered Inner Arm brat. "Who do you guys think you are? Don't you know it's against the law to carry guns?"

The white and gold uniform shivered with laughter. "I am Erich von Morwitz, Commodore of the Faith's invincible space navy,

and this is my comrade-in-arms Michael Rupert. Now, what is a little girl doing up here with all these old men?" He gestured at the bodies around him.

"The, the, Captain O'Bryan said I could help, as long as I was very, very careful to do exactly what he said--and never, ever touch any controls, no matter what, unless he said to. You don't want me to do that, do you? I was afraid he might ask me to do it--it's too complicated, and I'm afraid," she whined.

"A wise set of orders! You will not touch any controls, is that clear?" he barked.

"Yes, yes, I'd never do that. But please, can I sit down, I..." She affected lapsing into tears.

"Go ahead. But face me! And no monkey business, or it's the end for you!" von Morwitz made a slicing gesture across his throat. Barbara dropped into a chair and covered her eyes, pretending to cry. After digital filtering, the pirates' conversation was entirely audible.

"We are on course," announced Rupert.

"Decelerating as per plan. Only the overhead display is malfunctioning."

"That we can live without," responded von Morwitz. "Security backups are working, keeping the Sailing Master and his men out of the Engineering spaces."

"Then you have another ship, and we have a Gift to offer to the Upper Dark!" Rupert gestured at Barbara.

"Gift? You won't hurt me, will you?" She knew very well what Chaotics would do to her. Their God wanted pain. Its servants had bloody altars, instruments of torture, and mind-control drugs to forestall unconsciousness and insanity among the sacrifices. If the pirates would talk, they might give her some clue as to how she could get off the bridge, reach a pinnace, and escape.

"Hurt? We only cut the throats of old men. For a pearl like you, my dear, the end will be far more exquisite, far more brilliant." Rupert looked upwards in rapturous prayer.

"It is perhaps a shame to waste her," von Morwitz remarked blandly. "From her hair and eye color, and her height at her age, she appears to be ideal genetic material, suitable for breeding future generations of Naval Officers."

"The deal," snapped Rupert, "is that the Navy gets the ships, while the Clergy get the passengers, especially the young, the beloved of Aruble."

"True. The Clergy receive the final benefit of the young. I merely suggest that, even as the Clergy make temporary use of our ships, the Fleet receive the temporary use of her body. Strictly for reproductive purposes, of course." von Morwitz, without denying his partner's claims, continued to probe for a chink in Rupert's armor.

"Of course," grumbled Rupert.

"How old are you?" snapped von Morwitz at Barbara.

"Thirteen," she answered. And then some, she added to herself. The older the better, for this argument. If the fools she faced could be persuaded to view her as a walking embryo tank, she was prepared to play along, at least for now. Anything for time!

"You see, von Morwitz? At her age, she should have blossomed. She hasn't. She must have defective genes!" Rupert glanced back at the helm. "Two hours to rendezvous. Meanwhile, the trash in the passenger compartments...?"

"I spy upon them. They know nothing. They think only that their captain is sick." von Morwitz eyed Barbara again. She smiled, wishing she had some idea how to make the smile more seductive. N- and o-memories returned a complete blank on the topic. Until this moment, the question had seemed too disgusting for extended consideration.

"Who's this Leader fellow?" she asked. "Is he is a good guy?"

"Who is The Leader?" He pointed at his shoulder patch, which merged lightning bolts, fleur-de-lis, bumblebees, and scarlet stars. "Of the Totalitarian Front, of course. You have heard of us, haven't you?" She nodded weakly.

"Go ahead," said Rupert. "Recruit her for the Action Arm. It is too rare that Our Lord in the Darkness is offered a member of the Action Arm."

von Morwitz ignored his partner's jabs. "The Front seeks to revive the common political philosophy of those great twentieth century leaders: Stalin, Napoleon, Takamura, and Hitler!--as revealed in the True Faith of Aruble. We almost won in Europe, some decades back, but the traitors in our midst had no sooner gained a parliamentary majority for the Front than they voted us out of our own Party."

"Well," said Rupert dryly, "You were the *Democratic* Fascists."

"Didn't Hitler kill people?" asked Barbara. She really wasn't sure. She remembered the

names as belonging to the remote past, someplace between Elizabeth I and Victoria III. Hadn't Takamura been Shogun of California? The pirates seemed to have two factions. Could they be persuaded to fight?

"Your schoolbooks," responded von Morwitz blandly, "are contaminated by twenty-third century lies invented by the Caliph of Jerusalem. All competent historians agree, and it has been scientifically proved, that Hitler was a great humanitarian."

"After twenty centuries," countered Rupert, "a good historian can prove anything. That is why The Faith is so strong. Only our one true religion could survive so long without change."

Barbara leaned back. They were crazy. They also had the ship and its security systems. Her ploy in claiming an age of thirteen hadn't gone well. They might have been more interested if she'd claimed to be even younger. All she had now were her bare hands. In an action novel, she could swagger seductively between them, get them each to put an arm over her shoulder, and then take them both out with a single two-handed karate chop. She knew she was stronger than they expected, but not that much stronger. They both had a hundred pounds on her, were armed to the teeth, and probably had body armor. She stared at the consoles around her, as if amused by the pretty lights. The ship was still slowing down, with acceleration compensators close to maximum power.

"You guys must be real clever. Did you invent the death ray, too?" Barbara asked.

"In fact, it is my own invention, and a very clever one," answered von Morwitz proudly. "It's a drive turbulence generator. When I shoot, the target gets hit by twelfth level turbulence. Even behind a wired control panel or a ship bulkhead, you get level eight force, enough to knock out the teeth. The real secret is how to control where turbulence happens. The weapon creates a spherical zone in which turbulence can occur, then uses microwaves to beam power. Where there are microwaves, there is turbulence. Elsewhere there is no turbulence."

"Microwaves? Are those like submillimeter waves?" She hoped he wouldn't notice how astute the question was. The weapon's operation was clear enough, but what wavelength was he using for power transmission?

"No, no, a fraction of a centimeter, hence the

muzzle design. The waves diffract and leak around corners. With old-fashioned materials like sheet titanium, I can shoot someone around even three corners. In a ship, with composite materials the scattering is diffuse, so I can fire without getting a ray back in the face. The ray is less clever than my sabotage of the computer banks. The crew thought they were on course while they headed in a completely wrong direction. In all their displays, only the turbulence lines were real. The rest was illusion. Now, no more! I am busy!" he announced.

He's a dunce, Barbara thought, like everyone else in the Solar Republic. A lot of ego, no common sense, and no tolerance for pain. I can take force eight turbulence all day, if I want. I could take force twelve for a few seconds, I think, if it would do any good. All I need is a plan, and maybe some sort of screen. What does my knowledge do for me then? I might be able to walk their guns down, but they hardly need any weapons to fight me. She thought some more, waiting for clues to fall into place. To take the role of an amazon princess from some hero tale was impossible. Perhaps she could pretend to be an innocent pretty little girl. They seemed to like gold-braid uniforms; her cloth-of-gold gown would be the perfect match.

A half-hour passed. Barbara decided that the pirates had relaxed. "Mr, ummh, ArchDeacon Rupert? If I'm going to meet Aruble, couldn't I please be a little better dressed? My mother always says clothing counts a lot on first impressions," she asked.

"Daughter, I am delighted that you appreciate the honor about to be bestowed on you." His enthusiasm sounded genuine. "But where can I find you clothing?"

"It's in my cabin. But a robot could fetch it, so I wouldn't have to leave you alone. No one would ever notice a robot," she said.

"Well, all right. After all, it is for the Glory of Our Lord of the Upper Dark," Rupert answered.

* * * * *

Hamilton waited below, unable to modify the course of events. The pirates hadn't noticed that the Captain's transceiver was still active, so that Hamilton could watch the tableaux on the bridge. He chafed at confinement to the observer's role. The package might

give them a chance. A fool would try to smuggle a bomb onto the bridge. Security scanners would catch that every time. But he could use the box to send Barbara a message. The manual controls behind her were still operative. If she vented the Bridge Deck to vacuum, both she and the pirates would die. The security systems would then admit him to the engineering spaces. It was an unpleasant fate for Barbara, but the ship's doctor's firm specialized in clinical reincarnation. He could even promise her a physically mature body instead of the husk in which she currently lodged. Surely she couldn't enjoy being denied the pleasures of adult life? In any event, her chances of being brought back from the dead were excellent.

von Morwitz made a show of scanning the parcel, then let Barbara step into the Ready Room to dress. She slid the box open cautiously, half-afraid that some one had indeed managed to smuggle a bomb, despite von Morwitz's precautions. The box held the expected dress and, at the extreme bottom, an envelope. She desperately wanted to tear it open and read, but caution forbade that step. von Morwitz was doubtless using the security monitors to watch her change her clothing, and not just to see if she was smuggling a machine pistol onto the Bridge, either. The note, she concluded, was best used as a bribe to lull her captors' suspicions of her. She knotted her kerchief over her head, spent a few moments checking in a mirror, and stepped back into the Bridge.

"Well, do I look better now?" she asked. She heard Rupert's breath as an indrawn hiss. Her gown was scarlet, heavily woven throughout with cloth-of-gold. Cuffs, collar, stockings, and gloves glittered in the light. A full kerchief hid the top of her head, its metallic sheen accenting her hair. Around her neck ran a gold chain, stamped in heavy square links which ended in a massive sunburst. The ruby it framed burned brilliantly. Rupert nodded appreciatively.

"Lord Aruble will be highly pleased that you wear his colors," he said.

"Oh, wonderful," she simpered. "I'm glad he'll like it. But what should I do with this note I found? I'm sure it wasn't there when Mommy packed everything. Besides, the outside isn't in her handwriting," she said.

"What does it say?" Rupert had his gun out. von Morwitz waited to see how Barbara would explain the missive.

"I didn't think you'd want me to read it. I didn't want to get into trouble with you," she answered, handing von Morwitz the envelope.

"Very clever," said von Morwitz. "Neutral paper. To the scanners it looked just like the box. Let's see it." He paused to read the contents, then laughed. "It says they hear us, see us, know what we're doing, and can't get in to stop us, so they want you, little girl, to kill both of us. They even tell you how, with enough detail that you could almost do it. Of course, letting all the air out of this room would kill you, too, but they promise you a new body: a grownup one." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Such dolts they are! They must think we are complete idiots who take absolutely no precautions at all. Even if you did it--and I'll kill you the instant you try--it wouldn't kill us, only you."

"Hush!" countered Rupert. "They hear us, remember! No need to advertise exactly how thorough our precautions have been." Rupert wished von Morwitz would stop boasting. There were still only two of them. If the Sailing Master and friends could enter Engineering, matters might become rather sticky. "Why," he asked, "Why did you actually give us this note? And don't bother to lie. Unless you want to feel the sting of my weapon. I have a verifier pointed at you."

"I want you to trust me," she answered. "I'm not, I'm not for sale for the price they want to pay. And I don't want to die."

"Well, Michael," said von Morwitz, "The verifier confirms her words. Do you want also her oath signed in her own blood? Her friends told her to go kill herself, painfully at that. Why should she want to help them?"

"Yeah, real friends," she chimed in. She fumed at Hamilton's casual suggestion that she should save his ship by dying. Sacrifice in the course of duty was one thing, but she was a passenger. And Hamilton's comments about reincarnation practically told the pirates how old she really was. They hadn't killed her yet because they still thought she was only a little girl. It didn't make sense for Hamilton to offer a little girl an adult body. Or would a child from the Solar Republic want to grow up all at once?

From what the note did not say, she concluded that they weren't willing to--or couldn't--bring her back in first extension. She knew they couldn't restore her o-brain. She wasn't sure whether becoming an adult was better or worse

than being turned back into a child. In either case, she would lose the clarity and insights of her o-mind until she reached Cymbeline again.

A child's incompletely developed brain really couldn't hold even her n-mind. For a time, it would act as a gentle soporific. On the other hand, an adult mind would come with new sets of emotions and desires, with which she had never learned to cope. Passions! How could people in the Republic stand up to their lusts with little more than a child's set of thoughts and restraints? With that stress, you would go out of your mind or spend all your time... Of course, Republic adolescents supposedly did spend their timelike that. It sounded pretty terrible to her. How could you grow up if you had no time to sit back and think without your body providing massive distractions?

It didn't really matter. She had her own plan to execute. The pirates most likely assumed that her gown was woven from metallized plastic. The glint was actually masses of pure gold. The extra weight was substantial, but for once the material had an entirely practical use.

* * * * *

"Five minutes to rendezvous," noted Rupert.

"Can I see your friends yet?" asked Barbara. She stuck her head into the porthole, in the same motion sliding the porthole cover back under her acceleration couch. She knew it was too soon, saw nothing, and drifted back into her seat.

"One of the real emergency lights is blinking," she said helpfully.

"Which one?" asked Rupert. His data panels showed nothing. Had von Morwitz's program adjustments all been removed from the computer banks?

"Right here," said Barbara, pointing at the console with one arm. She leaned forward to read the label, her body screening her left hand from the pirates' sight. "It says 'Drive Int, interf...' pretending not to know the word. Not looking down, her o-mind counted off switches on the panel to her left, opened a safety cover, and pressed the tabs underneath.

"Just the Obliterator coming up," said von Morwitz. "Nothing to worry about. We just see a little drive interference."

"Yes," said Barbara, "That's right. This emergency light!" She slapped at the light. N-mind braced itself for a moment of pain. O-controlled motions were twenty-fold faster than their n-coun-

terparts, for the seconds it took them to exhaust local metabolic reserves, but even genengineered muscles rebelled against being driven so quickly. O-mind momentarily took complete control of her hand, setting her nerves on fire as it splayed her fingers. In a few instants she struck a half-dozen widely-spaced switches, all by seeming accident.

"Don't touch those," screamed Rupert. "Sit down! Eric, she cut off helm power. I can't see what we're doing."

"I'm sorry. I'm real sorry," whined Barbara. "I was only trying to help. Should I put it back? I think it was one of these." She affected confusion again.

"No, sit down. Eric, go fix it!" Obediently, von Morwitz rose and started down the stairs.

You cut the acceleration compensators, she thought. Once he's away from his post, he hits six gravities. That's a fifteen foot drop for his head, and impact momentum scales as the half power of the acceleration. Call it a forty foot equivalent fall, with a half-ton pushing him.

"What?" von Morwitz clutched at the railing, lost his hold, and fell face forwards down the stairs, ending with exaggerated quickness in a backshattering flip into the deckplates. Okay, though Barbara, now if number two idiot will please run to his friend's aid, we'll be done the easy way.

"Eric?" called Rupert. There was something odd about what he had just witnessed. He tossed a stylus across the room. It glided lazily through the air, reached the field boundary, and slammed deckwards at six gravities.

Rupert paled, then looked piercingly at Barbara.

"That was no accident, was it?" he asked. "You know how to use some controls, don't you? Hamilton's detailed orders were all just a ruse to fool us, except for his crack about 'not underestimating the gravity of the situation'. Well, you live by those controls, and now you will die by them. Die! Die! Die!"

She turned her back and started throwing more switches. The helm was nominally without power, but Rupert had ways around that. She had to isolate him completely, and let Hamilton into Engineering.

The beam from Rupert's weapon took her in the back. She knew what to expect, but was confident that her gown contained a better mesh than any set of control cables. The blast from the weapon was a spray of ice scouring her skin. It leaked around corners, through gaps in the weave, numbing her wrists and the back of her neck. Turbulence leaked up her sleeves, setting digital hallucinations chittering through datacables into her o-mind. She kept tapping at two keypads. As soon as she finished, Rupert

would be trapped, unable to affect the ship's maneuvers.

His weapon struck again and again. It was like standing in a blizzard, holding a place against the wind while the cold etched deeper and deeper toward the bone. For a fraction of a minute, the microwave beam reflected from something buried in the controls. The reflection left her dazed, half-blinded. She could hear a clanking sound behind her. Rupert had finally remembered that his non-helm controls were still powered. The sound was a maintenance robot inching its way towards her. As it grew closer, the bursts of cold from his weapon turned into a spray of frigid needles, which locked the muscles of her back and shoulders.

She let her knees sag. She had planned that she would pretend to collapse, but the pretense was a little shallow. Stiffly, she clutched at the porthole cover. Her hearing had blurred. Rupert raved in a language she could no longer understand. Stray irrelevant ideas crept across her brain, driven by the weapon's static. If she were a Technodeist, she found herself thinking, she would be on her knees, offering up hosannahs of praise to St. Faraday for his protection. Her metallized dress seemed to work as well without those prayers. She pivoted, lifting up the cover as a shield. Wherever the microwaves go, she thought, there goes the turbulence--and this is a half-meter reflector.

Her head burned. For an instant, she took the full unshielded force of Rupert's weapon. o-mind staggered through optoelectronic chaos. The reflector covered her face. Barbara gradually realized that Rupert's weapon had ceased to fire. A glance around the cover revealed Rupert sprawled across the helm. His pistol lay on the deck below. He couldn't have gotten more turbulence, she estimated, than I did, counting that stuff in myface. He's out cold, and I'm still standing. N- and o-minds allowed her a grin of pride.

A maintenance robot stood on the deck. "Back!" she croaked, her voice almost gone. "Orders cancelled!" Would it obey, she wondered? Or would it continue to chase her?

"As you command!" the maintenance robot responded. It rolled back towards its storage closet.

"Command?" she asked herself. Who did the ship acknowledge as Captain? Someone had to be in command, and that person had bet-

ter have a way to deal with the pirate battleship on their tail. To her surprise, hers was the only name on the Command list.

She wanted nothing more than to lie down and lose herself in darkness. Rupert and von Morwitz were both dead or unconscious. She had turned off the Security monitors, and restored Bridge gravity, hadn't she? It was so difficult to be certain. She could distantly hear Hamilton on the transceiver.

"Miss FitzRyan! Miss FitzRyan! The ship still won't let me through! It thinks I'm a pirate. You've got to reset..." His voice faded into the roar in her ears.

The world was swathed in cotton fog, through which clear thoughts slowly marched. The pirate was still in hyperdrive. A solution became apparent. She began programming the hyperdrive settings. Hamilton's protests came distantly to her ears. "You can't do that...our drive fields would shred them to ribbons...can't kill people without a trial, even the likes of..." She stopped listening. They could still use the ship's drives to escape. The backblast would destroy the unshielded pirate. Hamilton couldn't stand the thought of killing pirates without a tribunal first. Barbara was repelled by the Federation's flaccid beliefs about mercy. It was something about the way they all grew up---or failed to grow up, she wasn't sure which---something that made sure they couldn't stand unpleasant decisions.

"I'll get'm" she mumbled. Before Hamilton could respond, she threw the main drives into action. "Emergency escape," she slurred to the computer. Her voice was almost gone. Telltales warned of unusual stresses on the engines. She had expected the other ship to be badly damaged, not to dissolve into pyro-technic sparks. The pirates, she guessed, had expected no resistance, and were not prepared for surprises. The liner surged ahead into interstellar space. She fell back into an acceleration couch, exhausted, unable to do more than watch foamspace swirl around her like snowflakes flying before a winter's gale.

Flutterblast #2

(Being exactly what it sounds like... something loud & obnoxious but with a faintly gratifying aroma)

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Heroism & Character Mode in Novels & RPGs

I have to admit that although I'm not particularly well-read as far as most gamers go, I do like to read novels. That is to say, I like to read certain novels. I might as well confess right now, I'm fairly choosy. I don't often go in for the big-name authors. Classics are not my style. And the subject matter, while important, is not the chief criterion. Even the plot is a minor consideration. My interest is in the style of writing itself, which in a way is a fortunate thing, because it means that I can pick up a book, flip to some random page somewhere in the middle, and instantly gain a fairly accurate idea of whether or not I'll like the book. But how to qualify this style?

It's a hard thing to describe. What I'm really looking for are three things. First, the use of language has to be there, obviously. If the author writes "he said / she said" dialogue, then back on the shelf it goes. I'm smart enough to figure out that somebody is talking just by seeing the quote marks, thank you very much, so unless there's something interesting to relate, don't annoy the reader by overuse of the word "said". Secondly, I like to see thoughts implied via description rather than blurted out like some newspaper headline. "Mike watched her as she danced across the floor, his eyes narrowing into thin slits as he took a long drag on his cigarette," not, "Mike felt horny and pissed all at the same time." You'd be surprised how many writers like to tell you how their character feel rather than just describing the situation and letting you figure it out for yourself. Finally, and this one's a biggie, I really prefer

to read novels which are written in the first person. "I watched her as she danced across the floor, then took a long slow drag, the smoke circulating in my lungs like some foul, misbegotten demon. I stared down at the cigarette for a moment, it's tip a dull orange in the darkness of the club, then snuffed it out once and for all."

"Dude... I thought you were gonna quit."

"I just did."

Why first person rather than third? To me, first person is really the best of all worlds. Sure, it's a harder form to write. There end up being a lot of "background" scenes you can't describe by the very fact that the protagonist isn't there to witness them. But what he (or she) does witness can be described so much more fully. The writer is no longer forced to play intermediary between the story and the reader, supplying all the sundry descriptive details and narrating the story on the side. In first person, the reader is right there in the eyes, ears, nose and mouth of the main character. It makes reading the novel a much more personal and intrinsically intense experience. Almost as intense as roleplaying.

One of the chief problems with roleplaying in its usual form, at least in my opinion, is that it's typically a group activity. You and some friends are playing these characters, and you're going around having these adventures as a team. Now, teamwork is great. Don't get me wrong. But storytelling, by its very nature, seems to long for a single hero... a single protagonist... a main character as it were. True, there have

been some great stories that involve several main characters, but most often it is the case that the story revolves around one character more than others. This, again in my opinion, causes a soft and steady current toward the vast ocean of intra-party rivalry, as each of the characters vie for the unofficial status as "the main character."

In fact, I would bet that if you would think back to your favorite campaign right this minute, you would be able to pick out one member of the group in particular who was more central to the plot, more intrinsically involved with its outcome, than the others. It is in the very nature of stories to have this tendency. As gamemaster, however, it is our responsibility to ensure that this doesn't happen. We have to be impartial and have to constantly be questioning ourselves as to whether or not we are playing favorites, say by giving more "airtime" to a particular player, or basing a plot around a particular player to the exclusion of others. Yet, in novels, there is no such edict. Why? Because the story itself cries out for a hero, and the supporting characters are certainly in no position to complain. Heck, they aren't even real people.

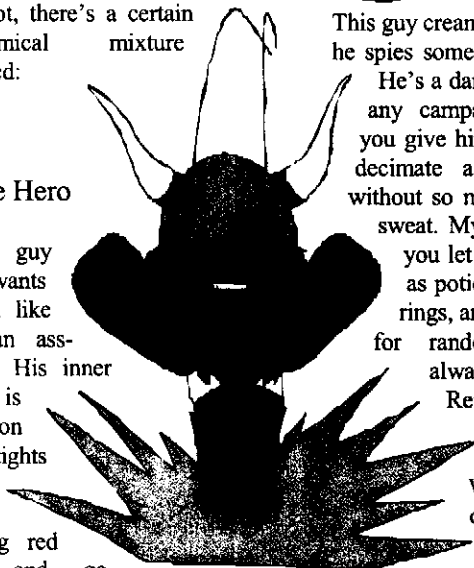
So, assuming you agree with me that this natural conflict exists in RPGs, what are some ways we can mediate it? Well, some of my favorite roleplaying campaigns have been single-player... that is myself as gamemaster and one player controlling the campaign's protagonist. It involves more work, in a sense, because there's no pause for the gamemaster to shuffle through his

notes while the players argue over what to do next. In fact, such single-player campaigns tend to move at a blinding speed since the pace of a campaign's progress is generally directly inverse to its number of players (some might even say it's inverse to the number of players squared). Such campaigns also miss out on the social facet of gaming: getting together with a bunch of friends for the purpose of bullshitting, and if gaming should accidentally occur, well so much the better.

But single-player gaming really isn't a mediation. It's more of an avoidance tactic. In order to mediate a problem, you really have to confront it head-on. One way might just be to consciously give each character a turn at being the main character. That means either running short adventures, or designing adventures such that each player has the opportunity to take the lead during different segments. In this instance, it might be best to really analyze what makes different players tick, as there are as many different sorts of players as there are different sorts of personalities, and more often than not, there's a certain taxonomical mixture involved:

1. The Hero

This guy just wants to feel like he's an ass-kicker. His inner dream is to put on blue tights and a flowing red cape and go



racing across the sky, no doubt to rescue some damsel in distress who will be all too willing to reward him with eternal devotion not to mention an assortment of X-rated favors. To

witness this guy in action is rather frightening, indeed, but witness him you will, for most male gamers have "the hero" as a prime component of their personality (yes, I'll even include myself on this one).

Handing him the opportunity to rescue that damsel (such as a pretty barmaid getting roughly groped by some frisky if drunken barbarians) will certainly make his day. Above all, he wants to feel admired and adored. No harm in obliging the goof.

2. The Powermonger.



This guy creams his shorts every time he spies some powerful magic item.

He's a dangerous breed for any campaign, because if you give him too much, he'll decimate all your monsters without so much as breaking a sweat. My suggestion is that you let the magic trickle in as potions or single-charge rings, and that the possibility for random backfire should always be understood.

Remember what I wrote about luck rolls last month? Well, let's break out a d6 and see if that potion he just quaffed was contaminated during the brewing process. "Oh, sorry... that potion was supposed to let you fly? Congratulations... you are a fly. A really big fly, but a fly nonetheless. Anybody got a swatter?"

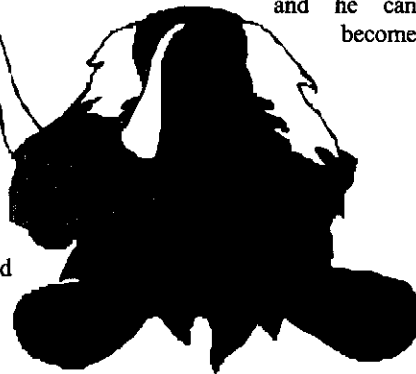
3. The Hack'n'Slasher



This guy is real easy to please. He just wants to swing his blade and end up in a pile of gore. Go thick on the monsters and on the descriptions of battle. He'll luv ya for it.

4. The Politico

This guy is big on campaign politics. He wants to meet all the important NPCs, and he wants to be their friend. By setting himself up as the guy who knows everyone, he's suddenly a very useful intermediary, and he can become

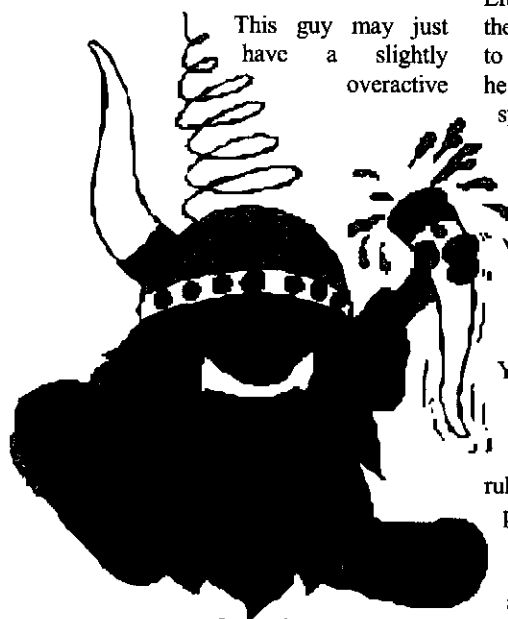


embroiled in all sorts of large-scale politics, perhaps even marking out a territory for himself.

This will typically be your best player of the lot, but he's also the most demanding in terms of the GM being well-prepared with an ample supply of NPCs, personalities, voices, and side-plots.

While your internal tendency may be to make him the "main character" of the campaign, my advice is that you consciously make sure you don't do this. Instead, keep the action as low-level as possible. Instead of dealing directly with the lord of the land, have him deal with the lord's personal advisor, relative, or some other NPC internal to court intrigue. That way he can have his foot in the door without completely taking over the course of the campaign.

5. The Comedian



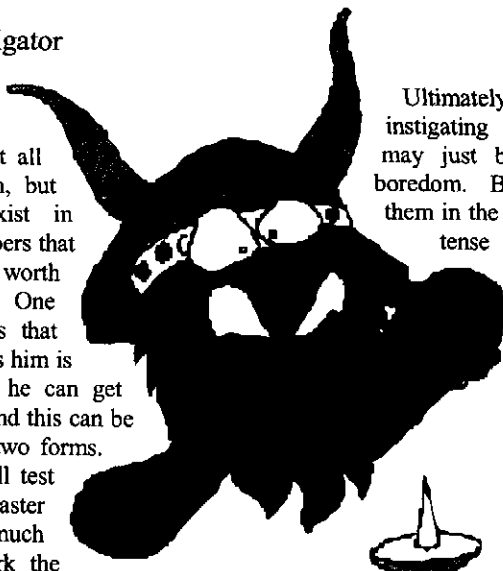
This guy may just have a slightly overactive sense of humor, or he may be a certifiable, slapstick, pie-in-the-face loony. What you do with him depends on whether he skirts the edge of silliness or prefers to dive straight in with wild abandon. You can either concentrate on putting him in awkward/humorous situations, such as having some pixies steal his clothes while he's bathing in the river (this can, in fact, lead to a whole side-adventure), or... if he's a real whacko... just let him find a wand of cream-filled pies and watch him go to work.

6. The Instigator

Fortunately, this guy isn't all that common, but he does exist in enough numbers that he's worth mentioning. One of the things that most interests him is to see what he can get away with, and this can be in either of two forms. Either he will test the gamemaster to see how much he can "work the system" (often by taking advantages of weakness in the rules) or he will test the other players by seeing how much he can "work the group" (often getting himself embroiled in some rivalry with one or more players).

Here, as the GM, you've basically got one of two choices. You can drop him like a bad habit, or you can try to steer him toward his secondary mode, whatever that may be. Very commonly, rules-bent instigators are just powermongers in disguise. The other sort tend to have a fair degree of comedian in them, and sometimes they have a fair degree of hero in them as well.

Unfortunately, talking about things openly will usually only result in defensive statements such as "I'm just playing my character" or "he started it when he sneezed." Talking reason to an instigator makes as much sense as trying to get a monkey to quote Shakespeare. Instead, offer him a banana in the form of slapstick or heroics or some bizarre mixture of the two. He may surprise you by playing his part to the hilt, while putting the rest of the group into a state of hysterics.



Ultimately, his instigating tendencies may just be a sign of boredom. Better to nip them in the bud than let a tense situation develop into something which is out of control.

The point I've really been trying to make with all this is that the plot of group-based RPGs is often best served when the GM has no idea which way things are going to go, and when plot becomes subservient to characterization (rather than the other way around, which is usually the case in novels). This way, each character gets to be the hero of their own story, and their stories as a whole, no matter how seemingly disjointed, interact naturally without regard to any pre-determined end.

To me, this seems the best way to run group-based RPGs, however, it does tend to get in the way of teamwork and group cohesion, so in the end, it all depends on what sort of game you want to run, and also how willing you are to hand the strings to your players. Basically stated, your mileage may vary.

Hope you had fun with all this, and I'd be interested to hear what others think about these issues.



Words on the Wing

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A Weekend at Joe's

Wednesday

It had been over a week since I had called Tyler at Pandemonium (a local sci fi/fantasy bookstore which also carries roleplaying games) to request a copy of An Evening at Joe's. When I tried again, he said that the shipment had just come in that morning. However, whomever unpacked them, put the books in the wrong place. He searched the store until he found them and called me back. I called home to ask Joe to pick up my copy. (The Pandemonium membership is in his name. Also I wouldn't have a chance to get there before I left in the morning.) He was busy, but Kiralee was home on vacation and willing to go. (Kiralee, being Joe's wife, can use his membership. I can't, even though Joe uses my credit card when he goes, since he's usually buying stuff for me.) During the first convenient break in our evening roleplaying game, Kiralee gave me my copy of the book and I showed it off to the group.

Thursday

I got up bright and early and went to the airport to catch my 8:00 am flight. I started reading An Evening at Joe's on the subway on the way there. Mary was already at the airport, waiting for me. She told me what seat she had on the flight there and I went and stood in line, reading my book while waiting. When I got to the front, I asked for a window seat either immediately before or immediately behind Mary's seat and received the one right behind her. We went to the gate and read while waiting. Mary had already finished An Evening at Joe's and was reading a different book. I spent a good deal of the six hour flight

reading. The movie didn't look interesting (it had something to do with boxing or training boxers) so I didn't watch it. I had pre-ordered the vegetarian meal for both my flights (to avoid poultry, which I don't eat) so, instead of eggs, they brought me fried vegetables and granola.

At the Vancouver airport, we got through customs fairly quickly. When they asked if I was traveling with anyone, I said I was traveling with Mary, so I got sent to the other window to talk to the person who was just finishing up with her. I showed the agent my passport and said I was going to see the same people that Mary was and they let me pass. We met a couple of Mary's friends at luggage claim, since their flight was in already then the four of us took a cab to the hotel.

As we drove up, we saw a car parked next to the curb, blocking where the cab wanted to park. We ended up pulling up in front of them and we wandered over to talk to the occupants of the car while the cab driver unloaded our luggage. Gillian Horvath was in the driver's seat with Anthony De Longis next to her. Anthony asked if we were all going to be in his sword class. I said that I hadn't signed up and asked if there was room left, which he said there was. Mary was in the back seat wearing a Queen of Swords cap, which I commented on. She said that there wasn't any official merchandise yet; she had gotten it by working for the show. I mentioned to Gillian that I had started reading the book on the plane and she told me that I had to finish it before I met the authors.

The four of us went inside and checked into the hotel. When I got to my room, I found Frances' stuff, but no Frances. I tried calling Vicki's room, but the room wasn't in her name, so they couldn't connect me. I went to the dining room for lunch with Mary and her friends and Vicki and Gail were there, so I said hello to them. They told me that the room was in Gail's name, but they couldn't give me their room number because they were in the process of switching rooms. After lunch, I called Gail's room. They had decided to try to pick Sandy up from the airport, but were having trouble getting through to the airline. I sat around the room reading, waiting for them to decide something.

Eventually, Frances showed up. She said that she had found Chapters and offered to show it to me. I was getting tired of sitting around the hotel room and it was beginning to look like we weren't going to get any real sight seeing in that day, so I went with her. She turned when we should have gone straight and we ended up in a different mall that connected to the one the bookstore was in. After wandering around a bit, we found it right under the Rainforest Café. Frances had eaten there earlier and showed me around with all the animal decorations designed to be able to move and/or speak. I decided that I wanted to come back and eat there later. We also checked out the bookstore and I bought their last copy of a magazine with an article about Highlander: Endgame. The cashier pointed out where the book signing would be when I asked, but had no information about where the scene from "Dramatic License" was filmed.

Back at the hotel, I tried Vicki and Gail again, but there was no answer. They had, however, left a message saying that they had to make photocopies and would be back later. I read for a while and talked with Frances. Eventually, we got hungry and went looking for dinner. Wandering around, we ran into Kay who wanted to go back to her room before getting food, which we eventually did in the hotel restaurant. After we ate, we wandered over to another group of Highlander fans and chatted while they finished their meal. Frances

and a woman whose name I can't remember wanted to see the movie again and everyone else was going to bed. I wasn't ready for bed yet, so I went to the mall with them, to make sure that Frances didn't get lost showing the other woman where the bookstore was. I also wanted to know where the theater was because there was a group trip planned for Friday. However, once I was at the theater, Frances insisted that I couldn't leave without seeing the movie again and she even offered to pay for my ticket. After the movie, we discovered the mall was now closed and locked up, meaning we had to walk around the long way. Getting a bit lost, we stopped in a firemen's bar to ask directions, which we got, along with an offer of a ride in someone's limo, which we politely declined.

Friday

After finishing reading An Evening at Joe's, I tried Vicki and Gail again, but the line was busy. Assuming that they couldn't be on the phone if they weren't awake, I went down and knocked on the door. They were actually still half asleep, but Sandy was on line. They weren't going to be able to go sight seeing with me before the convention because someone had convinced them to be pack mules and then they had to be in the dealer's room to set up the PWFC/VPFC table. They had a surprise for the rest of us, but it meant that they didn't want anyone other than club officers to set up the table. However, Gail had bought a ticket for X-Tours which she wasn't going to be able to use and she said I could have her seat. After a quick breakfast, I went to the lobby and Gail told Lynn that I was going instead of her.

The tour was kind of fun and I took a lot of photos. Unfortunately, while the company is willing to do any show that films in Vancouver, it specializes in X-Files, so the tour guide was pointing out at least as many X-Files sites as Highlander ones. There were also a number of Highlander sites that we drove by which he didn't recognize as such, but some of the other people on the bus did. We also missed some sites. For instance, the bus went right by the park where Alexa's bench is without stopping. We did manage to see some

other important places though, like the back stairs to the dojo. That stop included a bathroom break at a nearby Starbucks which Lois failed to return from. She called us when she got back to the hotel to let us know that she had made it safely. The last stop on the tour was Methos' apartment building from "Comes a Horsemen." Originally, he was planning to just drive by, but we convinced him to let us get out and take photos.



The Dojo

When we got back, I went up to registration where I got my con badge, the schedule and program. I also signed up for the sword class and the movie and bought a convention T-shirt. I normally don't buy T-shirts at conventions, but this one had a list of the authors of the stories in An Evening at Joe's surrounded by the autographs of most of them, including authors who couldn't attend. After a quick lunch at the buffet at Connections, a bar associated with the hotel, I went back upstairs for Anthony's sword class.

This was my first time taking a sword class at a convention. I had never been to a convention with Anthony De Longis before, though F Braun McAsh and Bob also do sword classes. But larger conventions have multiple rooms and usually schedule the classes opposite Q&A's or other panels in the main room. That was one of the nice things about this convention. There was only one room plus the dealer's room across the hall, which meant no schedule conflicts and I could go to everything. Sword class was a lot of fun.

Toni Holm tried convincing people to stretch out while waiting for Anthony. A few of us did, but it wasn't until Gillian Horvath got there and led the exercises that most people stopped socializing and did them. When Anthony arrived, he took over. Once we were warmed up, Anthony showed us the basics of how to stand, holding our arm out, pretending it was a weapon. He had a bag full of long wooden sticks that we were using as swords because a number of us were beginners that couldn't be trusted with anything resembling a real weapon. We went over the basics again, this time holding the "swords," then we paired off. After practicing our swings for a bit, Anthony showed us parries and we took turns attacking and defending.

We rotated partners three times, to practice with different people. The third partner I was paired with was Gillian Horvath. She was not a beginner. I think someone said she had been taking sword classes for four years. After I got the hang of things a little better, we tried moving while swinging and parrying with whomever was on the attack going forward and the defender backing away.

I didn't spend much time with my fourth partner because the class was almost out of time and Anthony came over to give me pointers and I got to fight with him for a little bit.

I checked out the dealer's room and found the VPFC/PWFC surprise, promotional photo showing a close-up of Dr. Helm (Peter) standing behind Col. Montoya. (Val) It's apparently a screen capture from an episode of Queen of Swords that the VPFC was given along with permission to do a 99 print run. Everyone in attendance that weekend was permitted to take one, including the guests, most of whom were looking forward to the show as much as the rest of us. There wasn't much else in the dealer's room, but I still managed to find a couple of things to buy.

The first panel was called "The Making of An Evening at Joe's." It was about how the book came to be, including how the various panelists joined Highlander. These were very

interesting to hear. Donna's and Gillian's stories were written while the series was still on the air and their existence was one of the reasons Gillian wanted to do the book. The various contributors were told that they would not be edited, except for spelling and grammar. In spite of this, the quality of the stories was very high for amateur writers because they were so passionate about their subject. Dennis Berry, however, did not manage to write his own story. Eventually, he agreed to dictate it into a tape recorder. He then mailed the entire tape recorder to Gillian who gave it to Darla Kershner to turn into a story. Peter Wingfield was the last to turn in his story for the book. In fact, Gillian had already turned in the "final" version of the book to Ginjer.

Another nice thing about such a small convention was the size of the room everything was held in. The back row of seats was closer than most of reserved seating at larger conventions and the front row was almost on the stage. It also meant a lighter schedule with breaks for meals. So I had time for dinner at the hotel restaurant before going back upstairs for "Behind the Scenes, part 1," which had been moved up half an hour to give us time to get to the movie, which was being shown at an earlier time than estimated. Donna and Gillian showed us dailies and other bits of film from the series, some which they had brought to other conventions and others that were new.

Everyone then headed to the movie theater to see Endgame. We took up half the theater and wondered what the people in back thought of us. It was obvious that we were a bit fanatical or something, since a woman who worked for the theater was talking to us before it started and we all told her that we had seen it before. Also, we cheered during the opening credits. Jim Byrnes got a big cheer, Peter Wingfield a bigger cheer and Gillian Horvath (who co-wrote the script) got the biggest cheer. Of course, Gillian had come with us and was sitting in the front row.

Saturday

Frances and I had breakfast where we ran into Amy and Anne. The four of us went

in search of Alexa's bench, eventually deciding to drive so that we could be back by eleven when the day's program began. While it's not clear from the camera angle used in the show, the bench is actually in a small lake with large stepping tiles leading up to it. And the park the bench is in is very pretty in its own right. On the way to the park we had passed the restaurant where Peter's Sentinel character is eating the first time we see him. We stopped to take photos of it on the way back.



Alexa's Bench

After HTV, a couple of video tapes the staff had, I ate a quick lunch and hurried over to Chapters. I was slightly late and missed the introductions and the beginning of Laura's reading from her story. They continued around the semi-circle, allowing each person to read a passage from their story. Donna's story, "Pants," had been written in script format and she had Gillian, Darla and Ginjer read the other three parts while Anthony read the stage directions. The last person to read was Ocean Hellman who read sections from Donna's and Gillian's "Postcards from Alexa," since it was about her character and she hadn't written anything.

People started lining up for the signing after the readings were done. I sat around and chatted with Vicki, Gail and Sandy. (They had shut down the table on the assumption that everyone would be at the signing.) I hadn't really thought about where I wanted people to

autograph the book and eventually decided, I'd rather have the signatures on the first page of each story. Someone had come up with the idea of little tabs that were taped to the pages, but all I had was a Historicon flyer I had picked up. I noticed that there was some blank space at the bottom of the flyer, so I tore it off and broke it down into strips that I used as miniature bookmarks that I wrote each person's name on. When it started nearing 3:00, the scheduled ending time, we got up and got in line.

We got to chat with the people signing the books while getting them autographed. I told Laura that I enjoyed the Raven and watched it faithfully in spite of its time slot. (She was the Associate Creative Consultant for the spinoff.) She signed my book, "To Cindy - A fellow Amanda fan!" Anthony remembered me from sword class the day before and signed his story, "You sword dance very well, keep practicing." I told Donna what I had told Gillian on Thursday, that I had enjoyed reading "Pants" after "Postcards from Alexa" because that way I wondered what the story was behind the statue, then got to read it. (They're actually printed in the other order within the book, but I had started with Peter's story, then "Postcards," before reading from the beginning.) Ginjer hadn't written a story, so she signed the Acknowledgments page. I told F Braun McAsh that I enjoyed seeing him in the movie. He told me that he had filmed a scene with Christopher Lambert that had been cut.

Once I had my signatures, I brought the book back to the room then went downstairs where they were showing "Under the Kilt," behind the scenes stories from the Best of Highlander video collection. The book signing went over, so Anthony and Ocean were still at



Ocean Hellman

Chapters when "Stories from the Set" began, but they had three other guests for the panel and started anyway. Matthew Walker, who played Ian MacLeod, Duncan's father was in the program and on the schedule. I had heard earlier someone say that Travis McDonald (who played the man who killed Tessa) would be there. The third guest was a surprise. Roger Cross was only in one episode of Highlander, but he is a regular on First Wave where he plays Joshua.

Anthony and Ocean joined the panel in the middle. Gillian had also returned from the signing and joined the audience. She asked Matthew Walker what it was like for him to be called back to play Ian MacLeod again because

the writers put him in another script. Ocean told us about her interview. When she arrived, all the other actresses trying out for the part were tall and well endowed, but she shouldn't have worried, because that really isn't what Alexa looks like. After the panel, they had autographs in the dealer's room. They had a table cloth on the autograph table that they were encouraging the guests to draw and write all over because they were going to auction it off on Sunday. Gillian came by and told Matthew Walker to have his agent call the Mythquest people because she wanted him to play King Arthur. Mythquest is a series intended to air on PBS next year that Donna and Gillian are both working on.

We went back to the event room for "Methos, Methos, Methos." Don Anderson (Assistant Props Master) read another passage from his story, "The Methos Chronicles, part 1." Gillian read "Train from Bordeaux," which I think was the first time she had done so, since at the pre-book conventions, she and Donna would read from "Postcards." Of course,

Ocean was available to do that and everyone cried to hear Alexa's death scene read with her voice, including Gillian. Ocean said that what she was most impressed by regarding Highlander and Methos was that people were still talking about her character and writing stories about her years after the one episode she appeared in. Ocean didn't watch television, though she had heard from a friend who did about the off-camera fate of her character during the Paris episodes of Highlander.

Since there was close to two hours for dinner, a group of us tried to go to the Rainforest Café to eat. Unfortunately, there was a long wait for a table, so we ended up at a different restaurant in the mall. After dinner, they had "The Writers' Room" where we got to write a script. I volunteered to roll for the episode and got a 1 for season. Donna and Gillian declared 1st season to be invalid since neither of them worked for Highlander then. Rerolling, I got a 3, but picked the 1 card, so it was the 1st episode. Someone came up with the idea of Immortal twins and we managed to come up with a plot that worked, even though the professionals never had, which is why they hadn't done an episode with twins. It was a lot of fun, just like at Legacy.

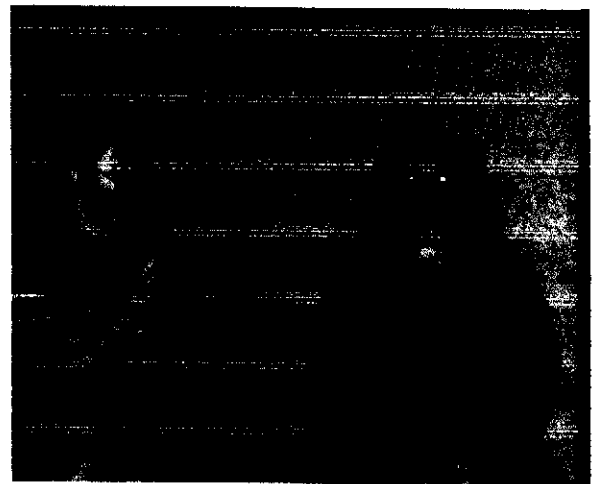
Anthony De Longis and F Braun McAsh came in to choreograph the fight scene, but they also talked for a while first, especially about the Spanish circle. There was a drawing of the circle that they passed around for us to look at. And they showed us Connor's "unstoppable" move from Endgame in slow motion. They also showed how Connor was holding Duncan's hand on his katana, so that he couldn't get out of using the move just by letting go of his sword. And Braun told us about how he had to smuggle a sniper rifle past several paranoid embassies for a scene that got cut from the movie.

Sunday

After breakfast, I went to "From Screen to Page," a panel where Ginjer and Donna talked about writing media tie-in novels. Donna read to us from Barricades, the

Highlander novel that she was unable to complete. And Ginjer also read an unpublished work. The Charity Auction immediately followed the panel. Items always go for huge sums of money and, small attendance or no, this convention was no exception. However, they did manage to avoid the requests for hugs and removing shirts that the more famous guests usually get. The auctioned items included a couple of Raven scripts. There was a toy version of the van that Adam and Alexa drove across the country in autographed by Ocean, Donna and Gillian with the forth corner left for Peter to sign at a future convention. Of course, the table cloth from yesterday was also auctioned. Somehow it managed to signed by a number of people who weren't present, including Methos, Kronos and Silas.

The original concept of "Sisters are Doin' it for Themselves" was fight scenes for female Immortals, but it was expanded to include women in general to allow Anthony to talk about Queen of Swords. They started with showing a Queen of Swords promo tape that included a few scenes from the show and a couple of commercials. We only got a couple of glimpses of Peter, but Val was in one of the scenes. Of course, we got to see a lot of Tessie, especially action shots. Everyone was impressed with her. Anthony told us that her pants were so tight that they restricted her movement, but I couldn't tell by watching her.



Laura Brennan and Donna Lettow

Gillian participated in the discussions about *Highlander*, even though she wasn't officially on the panel. Braun offered to throw her a microphone, which she didn't think was a good idea, so I volunteered to carry it to her.

During the break, I went across the hall to the dealer's room. The PWFC/VPFC table had drawn Methos' face on a blue balloon and Kronos' face on a green balloon and taped both to the window behind the table. Underneath the balloon heads were crossed balloon swords in matching colors. They had done Richie's head for practice, but the balloon had wandered off under a unused table, so I didn't see it. They had found a victim for the Lego representations of the Four Horsemen. I put the victim's head on display on the Lego tree stump.

"Behind the Scenes, part 2," the rest of Donna's and Gillian's videos was the last thing scheduled for the convention. I asked Gillian during the break if we could see the Queen of Swords promo again and she said that we probably would because I wasn't the first to ask. And we did see it again and enjoyed it just as much the second time, though she didn't play the commercials. The other videos were good too with many things I had never seen before.

After the videos were over, Donna and Gillian passed out flowers that Bill Panzer had

sent to everyone attending the convention. That was a nice thought. Unfortunately, those of us heading back to the States wouldn't be able to bring them through customs. I decided to put mine in water and leave it in the room, since Frances would be staying for two more days. A group of ten of us took the Sky Train into the city. We looked at the dojo and Blood Alley again as well as the antique store and Joe's book store. At dinner, we split into two groups, sitting at tables next to each other. That way the PWFC officers plus Gail, the VPFC president, could have a business meeting.

I had been hoping to do some more sight seeing on Monday, before I had to go. However, the timing didn't work out. I got up early and wandered around the shopping mall, which was open, even though most of the stores were close. Then I met people for breakfast and said good bye to everyone. And I shared a cab with Mary back to the airport. We discovered when we checked in that our seats were several rows apart as the plane was very full. Waiting at the gate, we figured out why. There were a number of cruise ships that had just come back from trips and all the passengers were flying home.

Color photos from my trip can be viewed at :

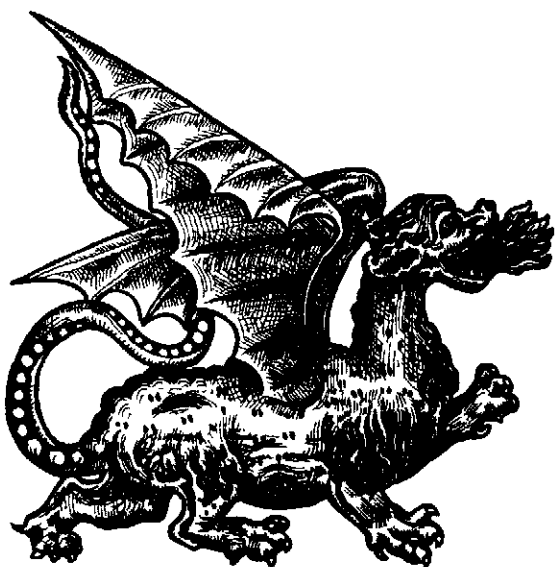
<http://www.fantasylibrary.com/office/cindy/waj00mi.htm>

First Impressions of Third Edition

I can't do a thorough review of the 3rd edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* since I have not read the entire thing. I haven't even bought a copy, but the owner of my local comic book store allowed me to look at one of his copies during my weekly pilgrimage to his store. What I've seen has not impressed me.

The new mechanic is more consistent, but I'm not convinced it's any simpler. All attributes now give bonuses if over 11 or penalties if under 10 and they all use the same table to determine how extreme these

modifiers are. Each thing that attribute applies (except spells) to uses that same number which is generally added to another number from somewhere else. This isn't too bad until you get to multi-class characters. Each class now, instead of changing target numbers for saving throws and "to hit" rolls based on level, changes the bonuses to the die roll. Multi-classed characters must take the bonuses for each class and add them together with the appropriate attribute modifier for each type of saving throw.



With a character's "to hit" value, after adding the values for classes together (but before applying ability score modifiers) you have to determine how many attacks the character gets and what the class-related bonuses to the additional attacks are. These are based on having a total class-based "to hit" of +6 or more, even if non of the individual classes have enough of a bonus to give multiple attacks on their own. Except, monks get multiple attacks sooner than other characters, so if most of a character's "to hit" bonuses come from the monk class, they might have more attacks using only their monk levels. That character may choose to use either the number of attacks and attack bonuses based on their total or calculated as if they only had the monk levels with no modifiers to any of the attacks based on their other classes.

Extra number crunching doesn't bother me though. It's the rest of what they've done to multi-classed characters that bothers me. All characters use the same experience table and a level in any class is considered equivalent to a level in any other class. So, instead of earning experience in two or three classes simultaneously, characters have an overall level and, each time this increases, the character can choose to increase their level in any one class. This means that no character can be multi-classed at 1st level. It also greatly weakens multi-classed spellcasters who have access to much fewer and lower level spells

than in the previous edition where a multi-classed character would normally only lag behind by a level or two.

There are also some problems in that characters get a number of extra benefits at 1st level overall some of which vary by class. Everyone has the number of skill points granted per level multiplied by four at 1st level. Since rogues normally get 8 skill points per level and wizards only 2, this means that a 1st level rogue/1st level wizard has 34 skill points while a 1st level wizard/1st level rogue only has 16 before bonuses for high intelligence. Even if the first character took the penalty of halving skill points when buying skills of a different class by buying wizard skills, they could still have more skills than the second character.

As if multi-class characters didn't have enough problems, they are penalized experience-wise if their levels are too far apart. This is a flat -20% per class which is more than 1 level lower than the highest level class. Each race has a favored class which is exempt from this rule. For humans and half-elves, the favored class is listed as "any." Note that this is actually somewhat deceptive, as the favored class is whichever class happens to be highest at the time, not whichever one is most beneficial to be favored. An elfen 4th level ranger/3rd level rogue/1st level wizard would not suffer experience penalties because wizard is automatically the favored class of an elf. A human with those same classes would take a -20% penalty as their favored class would be ranger.

Since the penalty is flat-rate, a character with enough classes could get themselves in serious trouble. A 2nd level ranger who was also 1st level as an illusionist, cleric, sorcerer, bard, monk and rogue would be fine, no matter what their race was. (Aside from the fact that they're limited to 1st level spells when their single-classed friends and enemies have access to 4th level ones.) Gnomes have illusionist as their favored class, so if the above character was a gnome and chose to become a 3rd level ranger at 9th level, they'd start taking experience penalties equal to five times twenty

percent. In other words, they'd no longer receive any experience, no matter what they did. A human would be fine. On the other hand, a half-orc would have barbarian as a favored class, which isn't among the ones listed. Their experience penalty would be six times twenty percent so, for every five experience points they earn, they *lose* one. But every cloud has a silver lining. The half-orc will eventually lose enough experience to drop

to 8th level again and can reverse their mistake while the gnome will never progress beyond 9th level.

The only rule I saw that I really liked was giving bonus spells to all spellcasting characters, not just clerics and druids. Since that is something which can be applied to 2nd edition D&D, I see no reason to switch to 3rd if I ever decide to play D&D again.

Diablo II

Diablo II by Blizzard Entertainment is designed as a sequel to Diablo. Plotwise, it does connect to the previous game. At the end of the first, the player character kills Diablo's host then takes the gem he is trapped in and places it in his or her own forehead. The premise of the sequel is that the hero is not strong enough to control the demon and eventually becomes possessed by Diablo. He then travels across the land, raising undead, releasing minor demons and attempting to rescue his two demonic brothers who were mentioned, but unseen, in the first game. One of the quests in Diablo II is to travel back to Tristram, the village the first game is set in. Your goal there is to rescue Deckard Cain, the wise village elder of the first game and last member of the ancient order of the Horadrim and he stays with you for the remainder of this game. He retains the ability to identify magic items that he had in the previous game, but will now do so for free as a reward for saving him.

The mechanics have undergone quite a few changes, however. Your choices for character classes are now Amazon, Barbarian, Necromancer, Paladin or Sorceress. Each one of these has its own set of thirty possible skills and spells available, divided evenly among three different types. Which spells or spells you can learn is dependant on your level. Five of them, distributed among your three lists, will be available at start and you gain access to five more at 6th level and every 6 levels after that until you have access to all of them at 30th level. You gain one skill a level, starting with 2nd level. Certain quests have, as a reward for

completing them, training in a skill of your choice, but you cannot gain skills from randomly found treasure items. Note that you can choose not to spend your skill points right away, instead saving them to buy the more difficult skills you gain access to at higher levels. However, the level prerequisite increases by 1 for each time you buy it. So, if it requires you to be 18th level to buy a skill once, you have to be 19th level to buy it twice.

Unfortunately, not all the skills have a value equal to others at the same level of difficulty. For example, one of the Necromancer's lists contains curses which only last a few seconds. Even taking them multiple times, you can't build the duration high enough to be of any real use. On the other hand, if you put enough levels into the same skill, it may end up more effective than a more powerful skill with fewer levels in it. Also, the character types are not equally useful. This is especially true in the online version where you can have multiple characters working together. Both Paladins and Barbarians have abilities that can affect an entire party of characters if they stay close enough together. Necromancers have the ability to create golems and undead, which are considered part of the same party as the Necromancer and always travel with him. In the online version, Necromancers can travel with Paladins and Barbarians and have their undead army enhanced by their companions.

The quests have also changed radically. The game is now divided up into four acts, each with six quests. Every character will get

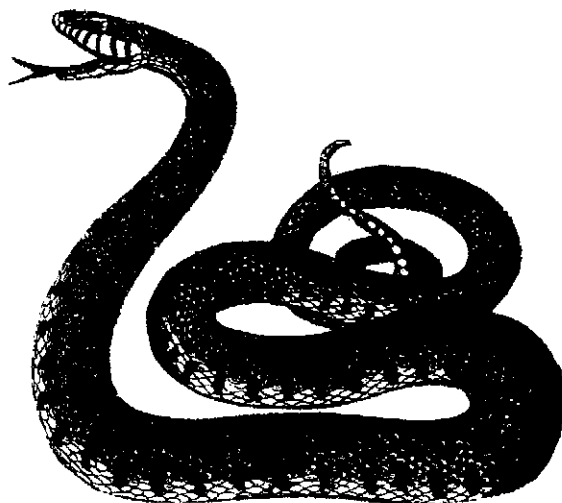
the same six quests per act. Each quest has a specific reward associated with it, though the details may vary. For instance, the reward for the first quest grants you a rank in a skill, but you may pick which skill. When you retrieve the magic hammer for the blacksmith, she will use it to enchant an item. You pick the item to be enchanted and the enchantment it receives is determined randomly. In the first act, some of the quests can be completed out of order, if desired. In act two, many of the quests are intertwined, so that you complete one quest at the same time as you accomplish a step in a different quest. There are also many parts of the map that you can only get to by completing certain quests.

Bows and crossbows now require arrows and crossbow bolts and can eventually run out of ammunition. Another addition is thrown weapons such as knives and javelins which also have finite quantities, but can be used in hand to hand combat as well as ranged. Amazons specialize in ranged weapons, having one skill list for enhancements to bow and crossbow attacks and another for spear and javelin attacks. The game allows you to chose which skill corresponds to your left and right mouse buttons. While the left one can only be assigned to attack skills (which includes offensive spells) the right one can be assigned to any skill you know or to a scroll you have in your possession.

Scrolls are now limited to Identify and Town Portal, neither of which are available as skills to any of the character classes. Both can be carried around in tomes which take up twice as much space as a single scroll, but can hold up to 20 scrolls. Wands, staves and scepters, instead of giving anyone with a high enough Magic attribute the ability to cast a spell, gives a bonus to one to three skills of a particular class (Necromancers, Sorceresses and Paladins, respectively) and only give those bonuses to members of the class. The minimum level to use that weapon is usually equal to the level needed to learn the most difficult skill once, even if the character carrying the weapon is not a member of the appropriate class. Since which skill(s) the items affect are no longer

part of the item's name, they may have enchantments using suffices as well as prefixes. The prefixes and suffices also have minimum level requirements which, if higher, could increase the minimum needed to use the item. While there are still items which affect Dexterity, Strength, Mana and Life, there are no longer items which affect Vitality or Energy.

Weapons may now be of superior quality, which increases one or more of the weapon's properties, such as damage or accuracy. There are also a few variants of sub-normal quality which all do reduced damage and have lowered durability. Weapons, helms and shields may be socketed. These are magic items you can design yourself by placing gems in the sockets. Unfortunately, there are a few problems with these gemmed items. Chipped gems are not powerful enough to be comparable with any but the weakest of standard enchanted items, except for the skulls which give regeneration when placed in a helm. You get one average gem as a reward for completing the first quest of act one, but otherwise can only get better quality gems by finding a gem shrine while already carrying a gem. Since these are extremely rare (I've seen an average of one per character, though I have yet to complete the 2nd act), I have yet to get a flawless gem, let alone a perfect one. There is also the problem that you can't disassemble an item again, so once you put a gem in an item, it stays there and can no longer be upgraded. And an item with a gem in it is worth less



when sold than the total of what the item and gem would be separately.

Gloves, boots and belts have been added to the types of equipment available to characters. Belts, in addition to their value as armor and whatever enchantments they may have, affect how many potions the character can carry. Without a belt, a character can have only one row of 4 potions easily accessible. Belts, depending on their type, may increase this by 1, 2 or 3 rows. When you drink the potion in a bottom slot, all potions in that column drop down one, making the potion originally in the second row now available.

Potions that completely restore Mana and/or Life no longer exist. While Rejuvenation potions now only come in one level, potions of Mana and Healing come in several. Unfortunately, the only potions you can buy from townspeople are ones of Healing and those are weaker than what you are capable of finding. While Mana does now recover on its own, it would still be very helpful if it were possible to buy Mana potions. Especially once I get an item which allows Life regeneration, I tend to run out of Mana faster than Life. Of course, I tend to favor magic using classes. The Paladin I've started doesn't suffer from this problem, though I expect this to change once I get the character to 18th level and get the Blessed Hammer spell.

There are no longer any Elixirs that give permanent bonuses to character attributes. Likewise, shrines which cause permanent modifications to characters have been eliminated. However, there are shrines which can produce some of the assorted potions that can be thrown as a weapon. There are also gem shrines which can create a chipped gem or upgrade a gem already in the character's possession. Other equipment modifying shrines have been eliminated, however.

Types of damage now includes cold and poison as well as fire and electricity. Most items or spells that do cold damage will also temporarily freeze or slow the target. Poison, instead of doing damage all at once, takes a

few seconds to do its full damage. There are still spells that do generic "magic" damage, though PCs may no longer have generic magic resistance to use against them. Monsters may still have such, however.

One of the nice things about the new game is that, if you exit the game and come back after you die, your character's corpse, with all equipment worn at the time, automatically appears in the town, so you can retrieve it. The unfortunate part is that monsters reset when you exit and return and become even more powerful. This means that deaths caused by stupidity or lag (if playing online) are recoverable from. However, a death caused by going up against monsters that are too tough for you probably means that you're stuck. Interestingly enough, it's easier to recover from death in the online version as you can frequently get back into the same game you died in, even if there aren't any other players still in it. That way, the monsters don't reset so you don't lose as much progress, though you still have to walk wherever you're going. If there's another player who was with you when you died, you may be able to convince him to portal you through so you don't even have the bother of walking.

The game will remember which quests you have completed and which waypoints you have found if you exit and return. Once you have found a waypoint, you can always teleport there from any other waypoint, even one in a different act. This means that your character can make progress in spite of the fact that the monsters keep resetting. It also means that you can only get the reward for completing a given quest once. Each player has a stash that can hold equipment that they wish to keep, but can't carry around with them due to space limitations. Unfortunately, this space is also limited, so you still can't have too much spare equipment. Your stash will remain intact from game to game.

Once you complete the 2nd quest in act 1, you are granted a mercenary and the ability to hire others whenever you want. (Though you may only have one at a time, so a new

mercenary always replaces an existing one.) However, the mercenaries aren't tough enough and tend to get killed much too easily. Paladins, because of their aura abilities, can keep mercenaries alive for a while, but even they reach a point where the monsters are too powerful. Also, mercenaries increase in level (or something) whenever the character who hired them does. However, mercenaries sitting back in camp don't. So, once your first mercenary dies, any replacements will be much weaker.

I have noticed a few illogical quirks in the game. There is a trap door to the sewers at the beginning of act 2. You have to open it in order to enter the sewers that way and it remains open. However, if you use the back entrance to the sewer or have been there before and go to the waypoint, you can exit out through the trap door without opening it. It is also possible to do both cold and fire damage

with the same weapon at the same time. If you use a waypoint to return to the first act, not only will Warriv and Cain also go back there, but they will somehow beat you, even though they are traveling across a large desert and you are teleporting. Worse, if you're in a multi-player game, it is possible for players in different acts to talk to the same character at the same time in their different locations. Also, unique and quest related monsters reset along with everyone else, which means that you can potentially fight them again, though you only get credit for the quest once.

Overall, I do like the game. The main problem I have is that all my characters eventually reach a point where the monsters are too tough. They die and then the monsters reset and they die at an earlier point next time because the minions have gotten more powerful. The other problem is that I keep losing connection when trying to play online.

Comments on Issue #40

Flutterblast

Welcome aboard. I haven't played AD&D in years and I've never played Top Secret but, if I get the time, I may take a look at the more generic programs on your site.

Zine Without a Name

I'm glad to see you back in Interregnum. The rest of us enjoyed the Perilous Earth game too. Even if you can't game with us on a regular basis, maybe you could come over for a run or two sometime. I'd be happy to play Terrwyn again and I know Kiralee would like a better idea of Starbuck's current status. We've had characters from other campaigns wander into Starbuck's section of the library and one even left a note volunteering to be a part-time librarian.

True Magick

The lower level characters in Furry Pirates are meant to represent children and other non-adventurers. Also, they use the same table to define what overall level and skill level means except that overall level multiplies total

skill points by 10. There is nothing to prevent a 6th level character from taking one or more skills at 1st level. (If they really wanted to, they could take 52 skills at 1st level and 51 skills at 2nd level. They wouldn't be very good at any of their skills, but they'd cover almost all of the skill list.) On the other extreme, they could take only one skill and put all their points into it and be 20th level at that one thing. Also, if the GM and players agree, there's nothing to prevent starting a campaign at 1st level, but you'd be playing young children. Mature Furries are supposed to be at least 3rd level.

If you like the fanfic that I've published here, I have more on my website. Check them out at <http://www.fantasylibrary.com/stacks/fanfic.htm> if you're interested.

As for Kiralee's story - I agree with you that it sounds like an interesting concept. Unfortunately, I doubt we're going to see it any time soon. While she has managed to stop working twelve hour days, she still seems to have more things to do than time to do them.

The Parliament of Dreams

Volume 2, Number 1

By Chris Aylott

Well, it has been a while, hasn't it?

It's been so long since I've written for *Interregnum* that I've completely forgotten what my last issue number was. No matter – I can always steal from the comics business and declare a “Brand New Collectible Issue #1!!!”.

A re-introduction is probably in order. My name is Chris, and my wife and I own a bookstore and game store in Northampton, Massachusetts. If you have some early issues of *IR* lying around you'll find a lot of our adventures getting the store going within them. We've been in business for five years now, so I guess we're doing pretty well.

I've been gaming for the last 13 years, and tend to mess about with a lot of different systems, not least because they're sitting on the shelves in front of me and somebody's got to try them out. In the last year I've run *GURPS*, *Star Trek*, *Unknown Armies*, *Aberrant* and even the occasional *Paranoia* game. I'm also a big fan of the German board games that have been making their way across the Atlantic.

Busy Busy Busy

One of the reasons you haven't heard from me in a while is because some foolish publishers are paying for my writing. I'm doing regular reviews and occasional features for an Internet outfit called SPACE.com, and I'm also doing some reviewing for a new print magazine called *Games Unplugged*. I'm also trying to get gigs with other outfits, but between the SPACE work and the store it's hard to find the time.

I've missed scribbling for *IR*, though. Any zines I send are going to be painfully short, but it's fun to write them anyway.

But the Plot Was *That* Way!

Wandering PCs and plots that should have taken a left turn at Albuquerque have never really been a problem for me. It hasn't happened all that often, and when it does the results are usually interesting. It's not something I worry about.

I've gotten a much better appreciation of the problem watching the gamers running in my store. Most of them want very badly to launch carefully crafted epic storylines, but the ship of plot seems to founder on a regular basis. It gets pretty frustrating even to those of us who are just watching the GM and the players play tug-of-war with the story.

I've batted the problem around a few times with them, but since I don't have a very good formal understanding of what I do when I gamemaster, it's hard to give intelligent advice. I have observed a few things.

1. Choosing a good beginning point is crucial. The perfect beginning seems to be the one in which the story of the adventure is inevitable, but not obviously so. Launching right into the action usually works, because they'll be too busy dodging the assassin's bullets or chasing the runaway baby stroller to think, “Oh, this is the plot.”

Giving them a choice at the beginning is trickier. Players love feeling like they're in control of the action, but all the choices have to lead somewhere. If one choice is a dead end, Murphy's Law dictates that the players will unhesitatingly make that choice.

2. Once the story is launched, you're on Easy Street – if you're not too worried about where it's going or what's going to happen. That's where a lot of the younger GMs in my store have problems, I think. They've gotten so excited about the storyline they've seen in their heads that they freeze up when something else happens.

It doesn't help that a lot of them are still players at heart. Their most important NPCs are usually surrogate PCs for them, and they get a little annoyed when those NPCs' goals are frustrated or the villains are blindsided by the PCs' clever plans. Too bad it's the nature of player characters to wreck the best-laid-plans of NPCs.

Our younger GMs are getting better. But I think it's because they're growing up more than anything else.

Scurrilous Comments

Since I'm short on time and space, my comments will be even more haphazard than before. Visualize many RAEBNCS.

Flutterblast #1: I like the D30 idea– it seems like an excellent way to speed up fights, and I've always had a soft spot for those big thirty-sided golf balls. If you switch to *D&D3*, are you planning to bring this house rule with you?

Zine Without A Name #1: Good to see you back, and congratulations on your engagement. Marriage is a unique experience. (I'm going to get so smacked for saying that.)

Knights of the Dinner Table is a phenomenon here. *KoDT* and *Dork Tower* (also very funny) easily outsell the dozen or more SF and and mystery magazines we tried to carry in our earlier years. They've also encouraged a lovely little mini-genre of fantasy comics which is gaining steam here in the store.

I get a huge kick out of *Nodwick* (the adventures of a much-put-upon henchman) and *Hackmasters of Everknight* (a fantasy comic set in the world of the *Hackmaster* RPG from *KoDT*), but the new hit around here seems to be *Knights of the Dinner Table Illustrated*, which retells the adventures of the Knights from the perspective of their RPG characters. I'd rather read new adventures myself, but go figure.

Swashbuckling Mage #11: As a fan of cinematic games and simplified systems, I'm not surprised you're confused and annoyed by them. You're operating from totally different ground rules.

Let's look at your description of the "simple" mechanic of *Cosmic Synchronicity*. Your damage system adds "a few" – how many depends on the specific case, apparently – "flat-rate numbers" (whatever those are), subtracting armor and toughness, determining what body part was hit, and generally futzing about calculating things. About two paragraphs in I start saying, "wog-buggle." If that's what you consider simple, then I don't even what to think about what you consider complicated.

Personally, I find using that many numbers dull and boring, but this isn't about me. You like it, and that's great. But from where you're standing you're going to hate *Feng Shui* and *7th Sea* just as much as I hate *Rolemaster*.

Most of what you listed and disparaged about the "way to achieve a cinematic style" is true. Mooks abound, the PCs are skilled and highly unlikely to die, villains have tragic flaws, and in some of the cinematic games (I'm thinking *Feng Shui*), the story is quite literally a formality that drives the action set pieces.

Here's why I love this approach. I don't want to add up a bunch of numbers and try to figure out hit locations. I don't care how many hit points the third zombie on the left has left, and I'm not going to kill a PC without a damn good reason, so why bother pretending that I might?

(Of course, sometimes it's easy to have a damn good reason. I'm finishing up a particularly dark and vicious *Aberrant* game right now – a real "can they succeed against impossible odds?" game – and I've smoked a PC more sessions than not. My players never knew I could be this nasty a GM, but they are quite literally begging for more.)

Like I said, different ground rules. I don't care about the system. I want to roll the dice and get a result I can interpret in two seconds or less, because every second I spend crunching numbers is a second that the players aren't coming up with death-defying escapes, brilliant deductions, or insane plans that send the plot off to Schenectady.

What your ground rules blind you to is that good cinematic gaming isn't about forcing some "pre-generated plot script" on the players. It's about encouraging them to grab the story and get as wild as they want with it, while adhering to the conventions of a good action movie.

Mooks exist because yes, there are piles of dead bad guys in the Star Wars and Indiana Jones movies. The stormtroopers and Nazis die like flies, and George Lucas doesn't stop to look up their hit points as they bite the dust. Drama dice and high skills exist so that the players will be tempted to try almost impossible feats. It's fast, it's wacky, and folks like me like it.

I'm sure your cinematic options for *Cosmic Synchronicity* will work fine, and I'm sure that anybody who likes the basic approach will enjoy them. Me? I'd rather play *BRAVO*. That design looked like it could be a lot of fun.



The Real McCoy

Addendum For Interregnum #41

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(Layout and art selections are to be blamed on Joseph Teller)

I sent this to Pyramid, but Steven Marsh (the editor) didn't think it would have enough wide appeal. So I'll send it here! (And check it over for more typos. I think it's sprouting them.)

Ready-Made Gods

So, you've got a group of players who rival the *Knights of the Dinner Table*™ for their love of hack & slay -- they want a campaign, you want something that won't bore you to tears. They want interventionist gods, you want a pantheon that's at least a *little* different than the last fifty kill-the-orc games you've run for your bloodthirsty little crowd. (Or maybe you *all* want a change of pace from heavy roleplaying, with a touch of humor...)

Look no further, pilgrim; here is a ready-made pantheon of good and evil gods for your gaming pleasure, with an in-joke and secret decoder ring included at the end.

The Gods

In the beginning, there was a creation myth, probably involving one or more leaders of the two pantheons who then turned against each other (so we can have Good gods and Evil gods), or else some One Creator who either retired or sacrificed itself so that it could have pantheons.

You're good, you can come up with something here. Don't forget a few "incestuous" relationships to get that Greek feel.

Likewise, no names are given -- you'll want to customize those to your campaign world. If you have different races or cultures, spread these guys out a little; some are worshiped some areas, others in others.

The Good Gods

God of Beasts: Every pantheon needs someone to watch over the animals that will feed and carry the PCs. Pray to this god if you're a veterinarian or just trying to keep your sheep free of terminal mange. It doesn't hurt to engrave his symbol on your horses' bridles or horseshoes, either. However, be careful hunting -- get too wasteful or cruel to your prey, and maybe he considers that bear more devout than you! He'd be a good god for elves to revere -- and maybe lycanthropes. (Perhaps his priests are rumored to shapeshift...) Alignment: Orderly Feral.

God of Champions: The patron of those who fight alone and turn into heroes, with a war-like priesthood. (Priestesses also accepted.) Very popular with PCs. Undoubtedly a human god (but see the dark gods, below, for an equivalent to give to orcs.) Alignment: Chaotic Violent.

God of Inspiration: Eureka! The patron of engineers, who build and design and invent. His priests advocate education, education, and more education, and can often be found playing truant officer to any stray children in the vicinity. They're a little obsessed with testing new devices to see if they work before they put them into use, though, so don't expect them to build a death-trap out of chewing gum and bamboo -- unless they really have to. He'd be a candidate for dwarven worship, as well as human; he might also appeal to *GURPS Fantasy* goblins. Alignment: Orderly Intellectual.

God of Merchants: If you're buying, selling, or transporting the goods, this is the one you want on your side. He's not too picky, either, about whether you're on the right side of the law or not -- fences will pray to him for a good deal. His priesthood is known to be bankers and moneylenders. Another god likely to garner a multi-racial following, if only because merchants must ship goods all over. Alignment: Orderly Rich.

God(dess) of Law: Everybody needs the God of No Fun, and here he (or she) is. Patron of judges, investigators, and anyone else who hands down judgments upon others -- like rambunctious PCs. Served by a somber lot of clerics who are often called in to, you guessed it, lay down the law. A pretty human-centric deity, but giving him/her to some other race could produce an interesting view of their culture. Alignment: Lawful. Period.

God(dess) of Life: This deity -- patron of mothers, fathers, and anything else living and about to create new life -- manifests as either gender, and is a fairly popular and powerful god/dess to worship, with temple prostitutes of both genders. The temples also serve as orphanages. Another deity likely to be multi-racial in his/her followers. (Woo! Elven temple prostitutes!) Alignment: Chaotic Fun.

Goddess of Plants: Mother Nature and the patron of farmers. Her priestesses (and priests) are fond of fertility rituals -- it's a good party if the fields are bountiful afterwards. Also peaceful, but don't underestimate the stopping power of a tree -- or a well-aimed zucchini. Definitely a candidate for elven worship, as well as any short, pudgy agrarian races. Alignment: Orderly Floral.

Goddess of Prophecy: Just don't sneer at "women's intuition" -- the followers of the patron of prophets believe that the future is written in a lady's hand. They're found star-gazing, crystal-gazing, or staring into the hearts of fires, waiting for that moment of inspiration when they get to speak in tongues. Definitely a fun one for non-human followers. Alignment: Chaotic Mystic.

God of Rock: ...and metals, and gems... Patron of miners, blacksmiths, and jewelers. Not considered the brightest mind among the gods, but steady and patient. His priests (and a few priestesses) tend to be tightly-knit groups who go into a wilderness and civilize it. They're also fond of ordeals to prove they can withstand their spartan lifestyle. Good for dwarves! Alignment: Orderly Macho.

Goddess of Sleep: Governing the realm of peaceful dreams and gentle hopes, this is one of the more boring of the Good pantheon. Still, she has her place as a healer -- especially of mental trauma. Got someone ready for the loony bin? Talk to these priests. Just to keep away from the elvish "peaceful tree-hugger" stereotype, make her an almost exclusively human goddess. Alignment: Orderly Peaceful.

God of Soldiers: This fellow is the protector of soldiers, the town watch, and anybody else who's a combat-trained cog in a greater wheel. Unlike his associated God of Champions, this deity watches over those who work together in groups. His priests (and some priestesses) also work in groups. Well-armed groups, too. He's a humano-centric kind of god. Alignment: Orderly Dutiful

God of Thought: A mystic and philosopher, who makes a good "wise old man" to run the pantheon. His priests are more reclusive than those of the god of Inspiration, prone to sitting on mountain tops and pondering the meaning of life. A lot of them are intimidatingly powerful mages, too. Urk. Popular among humans and elves, probably, as well as the occasional Yrth goblin.. Alignment: Orderly Enigmatic.



God of the Weather: Weathermen aren't noted for a lot of accuracy, but these wandering priests do a pretty good job. They also get to perform minor weather-related miracles. Don't get them upset unless you want to get sent "over the rainbow" (and your little dog, too!). Good for humans and nature-oriented races (though not dwarves -- not much weather underground). Alignment: Chaotic. Period.

The Evil Gods

Goddess of Chaos: Have fun, live fast, die young, leave a blazing fireball behind. A real party goddess, with a taste for seducing anything that moves. (It doesn't tend to move so well afterward, but hey.) Great for all races! Alignment: Chaotic Exhausting.



God of Death: Every pantheon needs one. The nasty fellow who wants human sacrifice every night, and twice on Sundays. Not too smart, but who needs smarts when your minions can raise zombie armies to do your will? Most of his followers are likely to be human, orcs, or some other short-lived race, and various undead (liches, vampires, etc.). Alignment: Chaotic Rotting.

God of Destruction: If the universe has gunpowder, he's got the bombs. Pray to him if you want your enemies trashed, His priests are not appreciated by those who mind the destruction they spread in their wake. Definitely popular with orcs. Alignment: Chaotic Violent.

God of Devouring: ...feasts on your enemies, whichever. His priests aren't so bad most of the time -- but they certainly do practice cannibalism... (Or other-species dining, which is probably just as annoying.) Good for all races, particularly orcs, ogres, hobgoblins... Alignment: Chaotic Hungry.

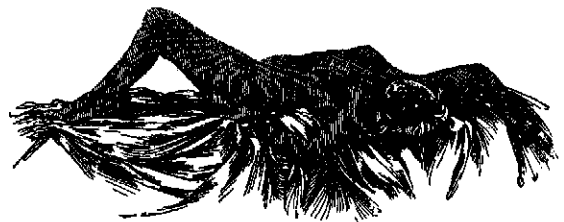
God of Entropy: He who drags mortals down to dust -- his worshipers tend to be of the breed who figure, "Give him enough victims, and we die last." They are often dark mages, too. They're not into property damage -- just crushing the hopes and dreams of everyone else. Nice for humans and dark elves, and would probably be popular with anti-social undead. Alignment: Orderly Implacable.

God of Fighters: What's this guy doing on the dark side of the spectrum, you ask? Simple -- he's the one who likes to have a little human sacrifice before a battle, doesn't know the meaning of the term "mercy," and his priests aren't interested in anything but the battle and the kill, though he does have a twisted sense of honor, and respect for a vicious warrior. He's prayed to by ninja, assassins, bounty hunters of the less cleanly kind, and mercenaries who fight for the highest bidder regardless of the politics. Good for the "nasty, brutish, and short" races in your campaign. Alignment: Orderly Violent.

God of Mad Science: Or mad alchemy, or Dark Magics That Go Boom, or whatever group has the most intellectuals who care nothing for the results of their pursuits of knowledge. Not only will these priests build death-traps of gum and bamboo, they'll set them up without telling anyone so they can see what happens. Good for crazy elves, dwarves, Yrth goblins, humans... Alignment: Chaotic Irresponsible.

Goddess of the Night: ...and all the things that go bump in it. Pray to her if you want to visit nightmares upon your enemies, or other terrors in darkness. Not a nice lady; her clergy go robed and veiled, and are rumored to practice scarification. Either a human goddess, or assigned to the culture where she'll have the most shock value. Alignment: Chaotic Scary.

God(dess) of Pleasure: ...generally spelled S-E-X. This is the guy/gal to worship if you like orgies and dark tantric rituals by the dark of the moon. Mind, if he wants a virgin sacrifice (and his priests have been known to conduct such), his minions will have to go far afield to find one -- none of *them* qualify -- and they're not too picky about consent. Definitely a human sort of deity, unless you have a thing for elven orgies. (I don't want to think of dwarven orgies, thanks, and s/he's a little more civilized a deity than most orcs would go for.) Alignment: Chaotic Sybaritic.



God of Propaganda: Pray to him when you're revising the history books, or writing a play to please the ruling monarchs. Mostly in the dark side because he doesn't care about truth -- though he does approve of a good story. Just file the serial numbers off an old classic and recast it as you need... Human or Yrth goblin oriented. Alignment: Chaotic Deceptive.

God of Ridicule: The trickster. Watch out for what he does to those who harm his priests (who are all infuriating practical jokers and biting pundits)... Another one for the humans and Yrth goblins -- though making him a dwarven god would really go against stereotype! (Give them little jester's caps and maces.) Alignment: Chaotic Sadistic.

God of Rules: (Or maybe of Rules Lawyers...) Bitter enemy of the God of Law, he's the patron of *corrupt* judges, monarchs, and anybody else who turns the letter of the law to their own devices. (Or simply breaks or makes up laws to suit himself.) Human, unless you have a race of bureaucrats. Alignment: Orderly Corrupt.

God of Solitude: We're all alone in life, and shouldn't try to pretend otherwise. All must be sundered into single parts, till all beings are alone and the world can return to solitary darkness. Not a fun guy at parties, and his priests have a hard time recruiting, but they'll try to get converts from all races. Alignment: Chaotic Misanthropic.

God of Thieves: Another trickster, but more likely to be prayed to by PCs. Big on style, kind of iffy on concepts of charity. He prefers cat burglars, pickpockets, and con men, but he'll deign to smile on muggers, too. Another one of those multi-racial gods. Alignment: Chaotic Exciting.

The In-Joke and Decoder Ring

All of these were drawn from the *In Nomine* Superiors, dragged kicking and screaming out to get their serial numbers filed off. Some of them kept all their attributes, while others focussed on only one aspect of their *In Nomine* roles.

So?

Okay, so you've got this background you can use to steal ideas from, if you want. You can do one of a few things:

- * You can use them as-is. This option is best if you don't want to pick up the main *In Nomine* book. Have fun.

- * You can get the main book and mine it for ideas, possibly adding in the Choirs (of angels) and Bands (of demons) as supernatural minions. Let your priestly sorts summon appropriate minions of their god, or send said minions against the party if they tick off one of these gods (such as by looting temples, killing priests, or other player-character hobbies). Also, you can use the rivalries listed in the main *In Nomine* book -- including the same-side hostilities. (What, you never wanted a "good" pantheon squabbling amongst itself?)

- * You can pick up the *Superiors* books and mine *them* for ideas. (Okay, I admit right now I helped write one of those and edited another. Admire my honesty and buy a book...) Good for lists of supernatural powers for the priests, or even just favored devout worshipers. Bribe your PCs to go to church!

- * You can figure out a way to explain that this is an alternate universe where the *In Nomine* background is *true*, but something happened such that you've got a lot of "divine cults" (and infernal ones) instead of monotheistic religions. This might let you do some "morality" plots -- though that's a long-shot, if you're reading this to add color to a hack & slash world.

- * You can use them as-is and go over the top whenever the player characters interact with a grand high mucky-muck of any of the religious factions -- or with the deity himself! (Of course you want to play the God of Death as a drooling moron, right?) Best if your players are taking a hack&slay vacation and are in on the joke -- or figured it out without being told! Be sure to get really wild with whichever Superior a player's *In Nomine* character serves!

Have fun! (And may the hack be with you.)

REFUGEE

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NO TEARS FOR A PRINCESS

Volume 1.

THE WARRIOR UNSEEN

Strive not, good sir, 'gainst stormy wave,
Nor cry my name 'neath star-topped nave,
For Death stalks me with wand and stave
To seal my soul in stoneclogged cave.

So shed no tears for princess brave
Who knows she goes to unmarked grave
But still will ride, her land to save.

...The Ballad of Three Princes Opening...

The river Tressin, half-a-mile broad, flowed majestically into the setting sun. Its northern bank was dotted with trees, red and yellow in the frost-touched fall air. Arburg-am-Tressin, largest city in thirty leagues, brooded on its southern shore. The city's gray walls jutted out into the water, oblivious to the rumble and groan of the currents at their base.

Two guards, looking cautiously across the river, waited on a stone parapet. They chatted nervously about nothing in particular, scarcely aware of their own words. From time to time they peered furtively over their shoulders. Behind them, to their right, rose a series of small watchtowers. To their left, the parapet ended in a granite-tiled plaza, the city's farthest projection into the river. A pair of blue-robed mages waited on the further wall, continually pausing in their conversation to look down the parapet beyond the guards.

A single figure came briskly up a distant stair. A deep hood and plain green cloak concealed body and face, but failed to hide the long stride and broad shoulders. The two guards glanced knowingly at its approach, then moved in

front of their tower, out of the figure's line of sight. The magicians pretended to maintain a conversation, each struggling not to look elsewhere than the other's face.

The figure strolled along the parapet, slowly nearing the plaza. A slant of cloak suggested a stare across the river, as if the newcomer were admiring the wilderness. Finally, moving quietly, the figure passed the guard tower and stepped onto the terrace. The magicians turned away, to begin a stroll along the further parapet. One gestured with a wand; the other mouthed an incantation as though testing his memory.

As on previous evenings, the figure stopped to watch the sun set. One guard reached backwards, ever so slightly, to release the tower door. Three figures in dull black -- black slippers, black trousers, black tunics, black capes and masks -- slipped silently from the guardhouse. One held a massive cudgel; the others waved tawdry short-swords. Three figures in black stalked one in green, closing on padded, spell-silenced feet.

Cudgel-bearer swung his weapon down at the green hood. His target lurched forward at the blow. A clatter of wood on metal revealed a helm hidden under the cloth. Cudgel-bearer cursed. Reversing his weapon's swing, he smashed green across ribs and back. Green skidded over the smooth-polished stone, finally rolling to peer skywards. Black ran in pursuit. One swordsman went to each side of their prey. Black dropped his cudgel, producing in the same fluid motion a dagger. His cloak swirled raven-dark as he pounced on his victim. The knife stabbed down.

The swordsmen saw Green's long fingers snap up, taking Black's knife hand at the wrist. The cloak drapped over both of them, shrouding prey and predator alike. A convulsive motion of the cloak was the knife stabbing down again and again. The movement stopped. The swordsmen relaxed, grinning at each other. It had been a delicate job, in which their part was now accomplished.

The guardsmen stood at attention. The junior wished that he were elsewhere, no matter that he would gain a promotion for his deeds this day. He had heard the thud of a club, the ring of metal on metal, and finally a solid splash from the river below. He counted the seconds and turned, knowing he would find a vacant stone plaza.

Three black figures lay in ever-widening scarlet lakes. The mages, returned to the plaza, gestured at the senior of the guards. "Tell the Master!" one of them snapped. The junior guard peered over the

wall. He thought he saw a disturbance in the water, nearly lost in the sparkle from the setting sun. He tried not to hear what happened behind him.

The senior guard scurried down the stairs, dodging temporary barricades held by his own men, to enter the city's heart. His run took him through winding streets, past tradesmen on their business, past taverns and homes. His boots pounded on the cobbled pavement, their rhythm punctuated by the wheeze of his breathing. He ignored jugglers, quarreling hobgoblins, a sorcerer's gracious arrival on flying carpet. A collision with the pushcart of a trollish streethawker sent fruit rolling in all directions; he ran on, ignoring the curses directed at his back.

Castle gates loomed before him. Barely breaking stride, the guard drew an amulet from one pocket; sentries gave way at its sight. A final sprint down carpeted hallways brought him to a double door. Four pikemen stood at the ready, blocking all entrance. They peered momentarily at the guardsman, then stood aside. The guard knocked thrice and swung one door open.

Within waited a solitary man in black and ermine. Gold lace on his coat accented a blond van Dyke and trimly cut hair. His rigid demeanor was complimented by dark, deeply carved furniture and tapestried walls. His lips curled upwards when he recognized the guardsman. "Is it done, Grand-Captain?" he whispered as the door swung shut.

The runner gasped a single phrase: "Alive, M'Lord Duke."

The blond face contorted in fury. "Damnation!" he shouted. A black and gold arm threw a wine goblet in an arc. It spun through the air, crystal sides gleaming, to shatter against the farther wall. "A thousand gold crowns! Gone! Wasted!" The Duke's fist smote the table, once and again, harder and harder. "May the Curse of Al-Benzir be on that one!" He sank dejectedly into his chair. "Summon my advisors again. There must be a way. This affront to my dignity can not be permitted to endure."

* * * * *

North of the Tressin, a green-cloaked figure stood in the shallows, still gasping for breath. A plain unpatterned cape hung soddenly around broad shoulders and narrower waist. The figure clambered up the bank, mud squishing under bare feet. Sandals lay discarded in the depths of the river.

On shore the figure stopped. Lean fingers un-

did a throat clasp. One arm gathered the cloak, while the other reached to the waist. The hood fell back, revealing a dented steel-lined helm with short nose guard. A single touch confirmed that the short-sword was still secure in its scabbard.

The figure looked back over the water. Arburgam-Tressin sat placidly in the distance. The sun's rays reflected brilliantly from tower windows, leaving the river an inky blue. Birds soared and dipped above the current, their feathers tinged pink by the setting sun. A tilt of the head released the helm, which joined the still-dripping cloak over a well-muscled arm.

Her hair fell back to hang golden-brown across her neck. One hand cleared stray locks from sea-green eyes. A gleaming line of chain mail rose above her collar. Seen without the cloak, her dark green tunic clung to her armour, revealing the slight curves of her body. She looked perhaps sixteen. Her mouth pursed, reflecting not so much fear as a touch of sadness. She pushed hair clear of the nape of her neck and probed gingerly where the club had struck her helm. A further poke at her ribs evinced a grimace of pain. As the sun set, she turned from the river and disappeared into the woods.

* * * * *

CHAPTER ONE (Mages, Men)

A small fire crackled in the hearth, its flames competing feebly with the luminous white glow from the wall sconces. Left of the hearth, polished maple shelves were crowded with books and scrolls. Before them stood several antique globes and an armillary sphere. A gleaming bronze orrery hung like a giant spider, guarding the great window on the adjoining wall. The window seat was littered with bottles and alembics; more abstruse thaumaturgic implements lay piled on the carpet beneath.

The girl sat before the fire in a deeply-padded winged armchair. A silk robe, ruby-red, was tied primly at her waist and pulled close around her neck. The robe drooped beyond her toes; deeply folded cuffs at each wrist confirmed that the robe had another, much taller, for an owner. Her armour lay on the flagstones near her feet. The green cloak and tunic were closer to the fire, slowly drying in its heat.

She peered down through curling wisps of steam into a mug cradled in her hands, then inhaled, enjoying the scents of cocoa, cardamom and mace. At last she looked up, a smile coming to her

lips.

"Grandoon?" she called softly. The target of her question was a dark-haired, heavily bearded man who sat puttering at his workbench. He was staring into an intricate piece of clockwork which floated, without visible support, a few inches beyond his nose. His tools hovered in convenient reach, equally without support. He finished an adjustment, muttered slightly, then looked to the girl. A gesture dismissed clockwork and tools, which fluttered obediently to rest on a felted benchtop.

"Ah! Elaine! Are you feeling better?" His voice rolled separately over each syllable. He stood and walked to her side.

"Me?" she shrugged. "Yeah, 'course I'm okay. A little swim and bump on the head never hurt anybody. You don't have to worry so much. I just got a bit wet."

"Bump on the head? Elaine, that won't do at all! You have at least three cracked ribs, undoubtedly compounded by swimming the full width of the Tressin. In late fall. In full armor. By rights, you should be confined to bed for a week." He felt for the pulse at her throat. It beat its uniquely intricate double rhythm, fast and slow, no longer racing from an evening's excitement.

"Hmhm!" she snorted. "Bed! For a lazybones like you, that's one thing. Of course, for someone serious hurt, a day or two might make a teeny bit of sense." Her irritation was only mock serious. "If I spent a week in bed, every time I got bumped around a bit, I'd be due to stay in bed for for ever and a while yet. Besides, it was hardly full armor."

"It wasn't?" His eyebrows wrinkled.

"I didn't wear greaves, nor mailed gloves. I didn't have iron-shod shoes -- just as well, it's hard to swim with them. I didn't have a shield, though a Lyran shield, cross-grained cemented wood, is a dandy float. A few bits of chain are hardly full armor." Her teeth gleamed behind her smile. Earlier in the day, Grandoon had teased her about wearing any armor at all in a civilized, friendly city. He'd suggested that if she really felt in danger, he could find her a set of jousting plate in her size. She'd told him to be patient. Her smile widened. As he looked to the ceiling, she reached up and slid his hand from her shoulder onto the arm of the chair.

"Now, Grandoon, look." Her tone was serious again. "You've been real nice. I mean, thanks for watching my pack and letting me dry off and giv-

ing me the cocoa and not complaining about cleaning the pheasants I caught and even letting me eat one, but I just came back to get my bow and stuff. I can't be staying."

"You most certainly can," he answered. "What sort of a host would I be to put you out into this chill autumn evening? Your clothing is only half-dry."

"That's better'n might be," she answered matter-of-factly. "I've walked in darn-sight colder weather in wetter gear. Visiting Arburg darn near got me killed. I should've left days ago, soon as I could walk without limping much."

"Now, really, you should surely hold the city harmless. The Duke can't stop every common street thief."

"You know," for a half-sentence her irritation was real, "for a eight-hundred-year old master sorcerer you can be awful, awful innocent. That was a setup from the word Go! Somebody just didn't put enough bully boys into it. Against me, anyway, he didn't. Might've been enough 'gainst some people. You'd think my reputation would've warned him. But whoever did it had the city militia -- and a piece of your Guild -- in his pocket."

"And you suggest on my innocence?" retorted Grandoon. "Oh, you're scarcely two-hundredths my age. I suppose I must be patient. You're talking about a real Trained Band of a city guard, not a bunch of village yokels whose necks will turn for a few pence."

"I know. I know! That's why it had to be rigged. On the parapet, no guards -- in fact nobody at all in the whole plaza. Right outside, two guards, two mages, and the guards hid when I approached. They couldn't've missed hearing a fight, not steel on steel, even if they're stone-drunk and half-deaf. They just stood there. Only the Duke or his cronies could do that. Rig the guard roster, put trusted people in place, order'm not to hear, and have everyone else out of earshot. The mages must've set an illusion screen, so no one in the buildings behind the plaza saw anything. I was dumb! I deserve what happened to me! I just walked into it. There's always bunches of people in that plaza at twilight, all watching the sunset. That's why I jumped into the Tressin. Didn't know what the backup was, may be more'n I could handle. At least without getting serious hurt. But a river's safe -- too big to put a spell on, leastways with me in it -- just a bit cold. It was better'n facing surprises if I stayed."

Frowning, she rubbed the back of her head again. "Besides, those guys were half good, almost. 'Course they weren't so good as me, but they came in a bunch. From behind. The guy with the club tried coup de grace with his knife. Was he surprised when I grabbed his hand! Must not've known how easy wrist bones crush. His friends didn't help. They just stood there, the slackjaws, and let me up onto one knee. Their fancy swords might've been magic -- but only fumblefingers were holding 'em."

Grandoon stood for a moment, lost in thought, pondering Elaine's observations. She tried to sound the role of a common sell-sword, but the ideas behind her words bespoke a razor-sharp mind, if one too confident of her abilities as a warrior. "I suppose," he answered, "you might be correct. The Trained Bands are under oath to Gow All-Knowing. To avert Divine Retribution, for failing to uphold the peace, would consume no small number of crowns. However, guards who obey orders break no oath. Such orders could only come from the Duke or his loyal ministers. All that lacks is a motive. Why would the Duke want to kill you? After all, you saved his capital from the Apostate...from the tyrant Pyrrin. You're a heroine."

"You answered your own question. { \em I } saved his city. Someone had to save it for him. I didn't do anything his siege engines wouldn't've done, sooner or later, prob'ly. But I did it, not him. And he was the jealous sort, insecure, even before he had to flee Arburg, in his fancy-pink nightgown. I didn't really save his city, though. His army did that. I just jumped a few sentries."

"A few dozen, you mean," murmured Grandoon under his breath.

She snorted, annoyed by his trivial, if accurate, correction. "So he's jealous. He's got a reputation for that. Look how long his good advisors last. How do you think he got himself into this mess? Besides, people get, get uncomfortable, if I stay around them too long." She frowned again, then looked wistful. He stood quietly until she began to sip at her drink.

"You will stay, won't you? You can hardly go far in the darkness." His voice softened. He leaned toward the chair, his hand straying again over her shoulder.

"Now, really, I take care of myself. Besides, where could I sleep? Or have you got a magic guesthouse to match your magic cottage?" She leaned out from under his touch.

"There is a bed."

"And leave you to sleep on the floor? You haven't been without a soft mattress in two hundred years, and you know it!"

"Well, since you raise the issue, to sleep on a carpet might not be altogether comfortable. Of course, as you are not that young, nor precisely unattractive, one might have supposed that you would be aware of a traditional and enjoyable alternative."

Her cheeks were suddenly a rosy pink. She stared into the fire, half-hiding a smile. "Oh, Grandoon, you know perfectly well I don't like that sort of talk."

"I just made a simple observation," he said unsurprisingly. "I suppose I could do some more work this evening." He turned to his workbench and gestured. Clockwork and tools floated back into position.

Elaine sat for a while, savoring the drink Grandoon had brewed for her. It was certainly better than her familiar fare of dried beef, traveller's biscuits, foraged wild cooking greens and tea. Dry clothing and a fireplace were friendlier than the out-of-doors, at least for tonight. Usually, she was uncomfortable under a strange roof, preferring except in deepest winter to sleep under the familiar solitude of the constellations. Grandoon's cottage almost made her feel at home, not that she had another home with which to compare. Forced rest after a narrow escape often left her meditating on her objectives for this life; tonight she wanted to avoid those considerations. Seeing Grandoon lost in his tinkering, she tiptoed to the bookshelf and pulled out a slim volume.

Far later, Grandoon paused and rubbed his eyes. A glance at the clock convinced him to dismiss his work. Elaine was buried in her book, deep in thought, while he walked behind her. She resisted only slightly when he leafed it back to see the title page.

"Treganth? { \em Elementary Principles in Symbolics }? For all its slight size, the { \em Tractatus Symbolicus } is a most weighty tome."

"Yeah, by the end, you have to be careful how you follow it. He sneaks his arguments up on you, bit by bit, in the earlier chapters. Then he ambushes you, making everything come together, all at once. Could we talk about it?"

Grandoon looked prayerfully at the ceiling. "You certainly could ask smaller favors. Few indeed are the mages who penetrate the core of

that volume, let alone its closing. But why? You're not Illuminated by the Presence, as you've noted more than once."

"Because it's there. So I'm talentless, and can't set the teeniest spell. So I have my private Silence, which damps all I touch." She reached out and cupped a lamp in her hands. The light spell within glowered red and died. "I can still want to know. I can still teach the Art, except no one listens to me. And magic is a part of the world. A big part, where armies are concerned." She removed her hands from the lamp, which flared back to life. "Just because the Presence is silent to me now, doesn't mean it always will be. Besides, it, it..." She looked into the fire. Her voice faded. "It does run in my family, sort of." She stared at the floor, suddenly very quiet.

Grandoon peered at her downcast head. She was entranced by ancient memories, gray and gloomy. Finally she dragged out a smile. "May be tomorrow?" she whispered. He nodded agreement.

* * * * *

The lamps were dark. Coals glowed low in the fireplace. Clockwork, tools, and book were carefully returned to their rightful places. Grandoon snored gently, alone in his bed. Elaine lay near the fireplace, layered between a thin pad and thinner quilt. Drowsily, she rolled to one side, then stretched, confirming that her sword was in easy reach. When she touched the hilt, the lines of her face and shoulders softened. She smiled slightly as she rolled over further, finally pressing her nose to the pillow and drifting off into deep sleep.

Grandoon's pose was an affectation. An archmage's immortal body needed some rest to recover from the strains of the day. For his mind, a few hours of dreams would suffice. Most of the night would be spent waiting, watching, thinking. His eyes might be closed, but magesight revealed every part of the cottage in finer detail than normal vision could ever perceive. To his inner eye, the fire of the Presence, the hidden power which underlies all sorcery, burned as bright as day. His books and scrolls glowed soft pastels; potions on the far wall shimmered with hidden light. The clockwork on his worktable encaged starry constellations. And Elaine?

He set his inner eye toward her. Every thing has an aura. Hers was violet-black, hinting at un-

tapped power, but power now quiescent, doing no more than scattering any spell set against it. An aura, thought Grandoon, should have structure, revealing its roots the way the grain of fine-polished wood names the tree from which it was cut. Elaine's aura was featureless as fresh-cast silver, lacking even the patina of age.

From where had Elaine come? For all Grandoon had learned, she had no past, as though she'd stepped from Heaven within the past month. His ignorance was not for want of effort.

When he returned to the Academy, his fellow mages would ask how a city so well-protected as Arburg-am-Tressin had fallen so quickly. Its defenders had been somewhat disorganized, but should have held longer than they did. The Academy drew a sizable part of its income from the construction of defensive spellworks. If those works had an unknown flaw, found by accident by the besiegers, the Academy's sizable royalty income would be jeopardized.

Grandoon's workbench was lined with memory crystals, each carefully engraved from the mind of an eyewitness. The task facing him this night was to organize the memories into a coherent whole, transforming a mishmash of observation into consistently patterned facts. The outline of events was clear, but curiosities remained. Elaine's role in the city's fall was inexplicably large.

The first interesting observations dated to six weeks past. There had been a Republican revolt in Arburg. The Guilds, led in many cases by their own Syndics, had risen against the lawful authority of their Duke, His Clergy, and most especially His Loyal Mages. The Duke fled over city walls, clad in a nightgown. The clergy talked swiftly, or saw their temple treasures donated to the cause of the people. The mages of the peaceful town of Arburg-am-Tressin spent their days enchanting potions, most learning barely enough battle magic to stun a housefly. Confronted with an angry mob, such mages bent to its will, ran, or perished. Further north, where all mages knew battle magic as a matter of course, the mob might have fared very differently. Further north, Pyrrin sent armies, not demagogues.

Arburg-am-Tressin had been subverted by agents of the Archmage Pyrrin and his so-called

League of Democracies. Grandoon had traced the essential details. Infiltrating the city, Pyrrin's spies sought out those Syndics most vulnerable to enchantment, inflaming their minds against the ordained order of the world. For a city to replace one group of nobles with another, replace nobles with other masters, or put up or set down a cult was one thing. But once a land was enrolled in the League, it could never depart, nor change its style of government without Pyrrin's leave, leave which was never granted. Worse, Pyrrin demanded that no mages, save those loyal to him, could hold power; all others must be exiled or carefully chained. Grandoon and the Academy found Pyrrin's ideas unbearable.

The revolt filled the city with rioting mobs, all too susceptible to the mass hypnotic methods which were Pyrrin's specialty. Hypnotic spells, easy to forestall, could not take defended towns while mages worked protective wards. Against a city in chaos, hypnotic spells were admirably effective. Years of work had been needed to place the kindling. Once the fire began, the city fell to Pyrrin's rioters in a single heady evening. Ducal levies, raised from the outer valley, put the city to siege.

Grandoon checked his rush through others' memories. The Archtyrant's hirelings were active in every corner of the world, stirring up trouble wherever they might. The Duke of Arburg was an idiot, whose every pronouncement seemed to reduce the store of human wisdom. For Pyrrin to attack the Duke was no great surprise. The anomaly came much later, during the siege itself.

Arburg-am-Tressin had the most powerful defenses in the Duke's domains. Its granaries were full; its shields against sorcery were well-maintained. Even with all his levies behind him, the Duke's siege was not assured of success. More to test the defenses than in hope of victory, the Duke launched a two-pronged attack against the city. The main assault was bloodily repulsed. The diversionary attack on the North gate -- the most heavily fortified point of the city's walls -- succeeded beyond all expectation, capturing the tower and opening the city gates. Once a foothold was established within the city, counterspells set by the Duke's mages dissipated Pyrrin's enchantments, freeing the street mobs from Pyrrin's thrall. With common sense restored, the rebellion crumbled.

The anomaly was the fall of the North Gate. No tower of wood or stone, unless shielded against magic, could long survive the attentions of a first

rate sorcerer. The North Gate had been protected by powerful spell dampers, great mechanisms of crystal and wrought iron locked securely in the bowels of the gate tower. So long as they functioned, any conventional spell-sending would soundlessly flicker to nothing without harming the gates themselves.

On each side of the gate itself rose a column of spell ports -- windows a yard wide through which defending mages might send maledictions against their foes. Permanent runes of guard kept out arrows, and assured that anyone trying to enter a port would be blasted by a thunderbolt. Elaine had been first up a ladder in an early assault. Not bothering to try for the top of a wall, she had jumped through an open port. The man following her up the ladder remembered that the thunderbolt had seemingly had no effect on her. Within the room, two guards fell to her sword; a third survived to describe what then ensued. In dying, the guards gave the defending mage enough time to raise a spell against Elaine. He invoked the Rune of Death Ascendant -- enough to slay three hundred unprotected men -- without success. Seeing that his own death was nigh, he then shattered his staff against her. The resulting cone of destruction melted steel fittings half-way across the room, yet failed to scorch her clothing.

Tower security was provided by shifting flame barriers which drew their heat from a central source. The journeyman mage controlling the flames watched from his distant room, while telltales reported Elaine's march through one barrier after another. A mage who saw her progress and lived -- there were oddly few of these -- said that her aura drank the flames, so that she and her armor were untouched. Of course, reflected Grandoon, there had been few mages within Arburg, since few mages were foolish enough to support Pyrrin's despotism, while most of those native to Arburg had fled. Still, details gathered here and there suggested that Elaine harbored a specific hatred of those mage-born who supported Pyrrin.

Elaine took the guards at the spell-dampers by surprise. The door to the vault was heavily warded; the wards vanished at Elaine's touch. Grandoon suspected that a solid cross-bar across the door would have been more effective. Before they could so much as stand, five men fell to Elaine's hand-and-a-half sword.

The others found that she wielded the blade one-handed with the grace and speed of a duelling master demonstrating a fencing foil. Despite five-to-one odds in their favor, the remaining guards put home only a few blows before she struck them down.

One guard survived by feigning death. He saw Elaine shatter damper controls with mailed fist, then hold the door against reinforcements sent to restore the dampers. The defenders directed increasingly desperate attacks with pike and sword against her. The Duke's men, backed by wall-shattering spells, fought their way through the tower, down to the vault. There they found a corridor littered with dead. Elaine, gravely wounded, was holding her own against four men in heavy armor.

The surgeons assured Grandoon that one injured so badly as Elaine could not live without the aid of sorcery. Since the aura in which she shrouded herself blocked all curative spells, the surgeons saw no hope for her recovery. Grandoon, curious as to the nature of her protection against magic, waited for her to die. In the instant that she yielded herself to death, her protections would doubtless fail, allowing him to penetrate her secrets. He witnessed instead her miraculously swift recovery. She slept for a day and a half, ate ravenously, stood on the third day, and by the fourth was back on her feet, albeit with a distinct limp.

Grandoon watched her closely. A person whose natural protections against sorcery stopped thunderbolts and Death Runes would be a useful tool in the struggle against the Apostate, assuming her inclinations remained on the side of justice and virtue. Elaine accepted his less romantic attentions, most notably the lure of his library. She was happy to discuss magecraft, geography, history -- excepting only her modest part in it -- indeed, she would discuss almost anything except her own past. She affected the language, though not the manners, of a mercenary sell-sword. While she was lost in thought, her speech became genteel.

Grandoon found her to be an enchanting conversationalist, far more knowledgeable than expected of someone of her age. Of her family and past life, she dropped only oblique hints. Asked about the siege, she said she'd fought a few guards, most of whom she'd taken by surprise. Then the Duke's men rescued her. She denied all talent at spell-casting. If she could command the

Presence, even very slightly, she was scrupulously careful to hide the fact. Most men-at-arms could summon firespark well enough to light dry tinder, though they denied that Firespark was sorcery. She carried flint and steel, and was adept at their use.

Grandoon suspected that she, or some unseen patron, actually used much magic, while being excruciatingly careful to avoid notice. Her passage through the tower could be explained by the protection of an amulet of great potency. Grandoon himself, or any other truly first-rate mage, could have destroyed the spell-dampers using her approach. Grandoon would have preferred other, safer methods against the tower, but Elaine's resistance to sorcery was not unique. The Duke of Arburg had reckoned himself safe because the world contained at most dozens of first-rate mages, none of whom would plausibly take arms against him before other mages would come to the Duke's aid.

Elaine's bladesmanship was possible for a master wielding an enchanted sword. Her recovery after the siege was slightly short of miraculous. Her approach to the city was at best improbable. She had met a southern contingent of archers, been invited to share a campfire, and paid for her meals with good coin. The men remembered her as a runaway farmboy, young, with an impressive set of weapons. Then they ignored her. Her cloak had hidden her figure; seemingly, they had not noticed her sex. Female sell-swords were not unknown, but militiamen three days from wives and lovers were usually aware of a woman's presence.

To Grandoon's inner eye, the archers' memories appeared faded, bleached by some outside force, so the men barely remembered Elaine. A week after the siege, her presence in their midst had been forgotten. Grandoon could find no trace of any spell affecting the archer's minds. More surprising still, no one had noticed her before she met the archers. She had travelled busy roads. Any competent mage should have noted the peculiarity of her aura, but no one had marked her passage.

Elaine's armor was well-forged, but quite free of inlaid spells. Only her clothing was touched with the Presence. It was an Irrilesi weave, the sea-elves' enchantments making it both self-cleaning and self-repairing. Out of Irrilesi hands, the cloak was a rarity, though one

only a skilled magician would recognize. Elaine claimed the cloak to be a gift from a friend.

Elaine's feats in battle were almost beyond belief, at least for one without thaumaturgic aid. Without magical armaments, how could she fight two men at once, let alone five? Most wordswomen depended on speed and skill to compensate for superior male weight; she seemed to have passed to some higher level of talent. If she could teach others her skill with the sword, it would put a definite crimp in the sale of enchanted blades, hurting Grandoon himself -- not to mention the Academy -- in the pocketbook.

He had tried crystomancy, looking back in time to watch her fight. The gatetower eluded him. Of her encounter this afternoon, only her swim across the Tressin could be visualized clearly. Perhaps a very strong man could do what she had done, and be no more than a little tired afterwards. However, only the greatest of swordsmen -- all men whom Grandoon could name -- could fight five competent opponents at once and have a victory. In the tower, Elaine had done that, more than once. But great swordsmen were seldom interested in the details of magecraft, in the differences between naming a rune, calling a rune, and becoming a rune -- taking an aspect of a rune into one's being. Elaine was curious about all of those things, at a technically sophisticated level. Grandoon let his puzzlement fade as he thought of other things. Soon he would return to the Academy, to re-enter the rationality of academic politics based on unlimited tenure without retirement for age.

CHAPTER TWO (Mages, Elaine, Men)

The next evening found them well away from Arbure. Grandoon grimaced when he recalled the afternoon's events. He had spent hours improving his clockwork, a pleasure for which he recently had had less and less time. Elaine occasionally interrupted him to ask about Treganth. {\nem Elementary Principles in Symbolics} was at best a subtle text. Treganth was reputed to have made only a single mistake in all his written work, that a trivial one which Treganth himself had corrected. It was also reputed that in all Treganth's work only a single sentence was easy to understand, that being his acknowledgement to his printer's sponsors. To Grandoon's dismay, Elaine reserved her questions for the most obscure parts of Treganth's commen-

tary.

Their discussion of Treganth had been interrupted by the arrival of Earl Yoog, a ferret-eyed syco^{ph}phant of the Duke's. The Earl brought with him two gifts: an enchanted sword, and a prophecy from the local sybil, swearing that Elaine's fortune was best sought to the North. Elaine was rigidly and precisely polite. The Earl took her politeness as a series of veiled attacks on his liege's generosity, and departed in a fuming rage. Elaine told Grandoon that it was time to go. He grumphed and harrumphed about travelling, though he knew that a Duke who hated Elaine might not be pleased with her companions.

Grandoon's thoughts returned to the present. The twin moon Tegel-La was well above the horizon. The north highway, faced with gray-white limestone, was a barely seen ribbon, fading into the woods ahead. Elaine kept to the side of the road, quietly slipping from tree to tree, from shadow to shadow. Grandoon marched boldly down the road's center, as though the night could hold no danger for him.

He gestured for her to stop. He wrapped himself in shadow, and bound the air around them in silence. A few passes of his hands formed the illusion of the two of them standing side by side, brilliantly lit by a sorcerer's staff. A final wave sent the illusions marching down the road. Satisfied with his work, he followed, preceded at a hundred paces by the images he had created. Let thieves and cutpurses strike; they would only reveal themselves to his wrath.

While the moon rose slowly into the western sky, they spoke of little things: the sights of Arbure, a shooting star, the advance of the fall weather. An owl hooting in the distance was their only company.

"Do your ribs still bother you?" asked Grandoon.

"Naw, not really. I mean, I still feel bruises. Don't worry. That couple-three street thugs didn't really hurt me. I was more wet, angry, and cold than anything else."

"You think they were cutpurses?"

"Well, sure. They were lucky, and I was careless. 'Course, if I wandered through towns -- ones where people know me -- in simple cloth, no helm or armor, I'd be dead again, ummh, I mean, well, half-dead again. You saw the dent in my helmet -- and I really appreciate your fixing it. But the Duke's a cheapskate.

He just used road vultures, the sort who'd have their own accidents later, with no pointed questions asked. They just had a club and some half-decent swords. No armor. Those ... they didn't even use their capes to tangle my sword. Jerks!" She snorted derisively. "They were nice capes, too, black satin and gold lace lining."

Grandoon was suddenly more attentive. "Gold lace? On the inside?"

"Yeah, now that you ask. Hadn't thought about it. Inside. Even their tailors were dumb. You couldn't see it most of the time."

Grandoon pulled a scrap of parchment from one pocket. "Was this how the lace was worked?" he asked. Luminous ink flowed over the page, finally forming a series of interlocked spirals.

Elaine scowled. "Didn't look at it much. I'd other things to do, right then, and it was pretty rumpled." She paused in thought. Her memory, which readily stored even the most intricate of runes, matched Grandoon's parchment against half-glimpsed curliques of spun gold. "That's it. I'm sure. Is it some local bunch of punks?"

"That, my dear," Grandoon explained in his usual avuncular tone, "is how one recognizes an assassin of the Order of The Seven Deaths, while he is practicing his vocation. Should the question arise, I trust you will neglect to remember who told you this ill-known fact."

"Master assassins? For me? But why bother? Those guys cost a mint, not that they're worth it. I didn't think the Duke was that jealous. Don't worry. My lips are sealed. Those creeps hire out to Pyrrin. I've got one answer for them." She passed one finger across her throat.

"You have the most charming gift of understatement. As you left the three of them dead, your foe also owes their weregild, which doubtless will set someone -- the city's ratepayers, I fear -- back a tidy sum. The Duke wanted success, followed by a sure absence of consequential blackmail. The Order is reliable in the last respect."

"Reliable? Those clods were feeble! I can hold my breath longer than it took to stomp all three of them," said Elaine.

"Their blades are also set with the direst of poisons, more powerful than anything other than the distilled essence of manticore venom. Had you been scratched..." His voice trailed off when he remembered that she had taken not one but several deep slashes.

"Must've washed off in the river," she answered nonchalantly. "The cuts did sting more than they should've."

"Yes, of course," answered Grandoon. A single scratch from an assassin's blade brought an elephant to its knees in a few moments. He recounted his protections, briefly afraid she was part of an elaborate plot to kill him. You, he thought to himself, you thought she was absurdly lucky at the gate. She looks like a not-quite-grown-up fifteen-year-old hauling her big brother's overweight sword and oversize bow. But she's more than that, in strange ways. Her protections against magecraft and poison are not unique, but how do they work? She's not wearing a single amulet. You made your investigations today. Everything you learned points to the truth of her story about the assassins.

"And the Duke sent them," said Elaine, more to herself than to Grandoon. "That wall was empty, no witnesses. Only the Duke could arrange that. But why?" She was downfaced. "I saved his city, and didn't even ask for any big reward or anything like that." Her thoughts hurt her more than any of the blows she had taken. "He couldn't be afraid of me. And he does have some decent advisors, even if he is jealous and suspicious. It must be like court manners. No matter what I say, people get mad. Like Earl Yoog today. He gave me the sword, but when I tried to thank him, ... , well, you saw what happened. I never say things quite right."

"I saw and heard. However, your style was entirely proper." From her manner, Grandoon concluded that Elaine was of a noble house; peasant maids simply did not learn the modes of address she had used so elegantly.

"My style? Oh, come on, Grandoon! You were there! He was angry, just from having to put up with me. I never say things quite right. But I'm never sure afterwards. What do I say wrong?" She shook her head and looked skywards. Tegel-La was a tangerine half-hidden in a black lattice of leaves and branches.

"Do you really want that answered?" His tone was suddenly serious.

"Thanks, I've had my fill of lectures on bowing and scraping." She continued to look at the sky, drinking in the peace of moon and stars. For a space they walked together, neither speaking. "That is what you meant, isn't it? Oh, go on! Tell me. Why not?"

"Some things are difficult to say with grace. You might take offense." She caught a retort in her throat, then nodded impatiently. He stared at how the moonlight caught the curves and planes of her face.

"Doubtless," he began, "you know Bishop Averoff's book of riddles. A classic is 'What is the way of a moon through the sky, a swan through the air, a ship through the sea, a man with a maid?' I have spent much of my life trying to answer the first question, without great success. The second and third parts are not so hard, at least for one of my modest learning. Recently, I came to understand the last."

"You? Recently? But you're supposed to have ... I mean, your reputation as a lady's man got here before you."

Grandoon smiled. "You're thinking of something a little different. But surely someone your age has known a boyfriend or two?"

"Me? Oh, yeah! Sure! Two or three all the time. Hadn't you noticed?" The defiance melted from her voice. "No, not really. When I was a lot younger, there were a couple fellows -- all we ever did is hold hands. But none of them ever liked me for very long."

"Did you like them?"

"Well, ... yes". Her sadness gave her an aura of greater age. She wondered why she was admitting so much. Where did Grandoon's arguments lead?

"In my homeland, things were different. The warmth was actually in the caress itself, not in the thought behind it. Here the relevant proverb is 'None greeted as warmly as mage's friends, nor met so coldly as mage's foes.' I suspect you never thought that proverb made sense. Unlike your fellows, you find my greetings neither warmer nor colder than anyone else's. The reason -- your problem -- is you, rather, your aura. Your suitors, whatever their inclinations, were daunted by that fortress which is your mind."

"The problem's me?" she shouted, at the edge of an explosion of anger. He hardly had given an explanation, let alone what she'd expected. Was he mocking her because she'd rejected him last night? "Are you trying to confuse me?" Her words came in bursts, like the thrusts of a dagger. "You've done it! Riddles and proverbs! You know perfectly well I'm no mage. And the last one before you to notice I'm a girl was that drunkard, Earl Glord. He didn't try court manners or ca-

resses, either, or take a simple 'no' for an answer. How did you think his arms got themselves broken?"

"Now, let me weave together the threads of my argument -- though you gave the Earl his just desserts." Grandoon continued imperturbably ahead. "Most men have no command of the Presence, of the Art which raises mountains and revives the dead. But almost everyone in the world -- in this world, anyway -- uses magic all the time in small ways."

"What? Magic's something you learn from books, from meditation and ritual practice, not something for every swineherd and goatgirl."

"You don't count tind erspark and horsecalm and doorseal and dustbane?" he asked.

"Those aren't the same. Though I guess they must be some sort of magic, now that you mention it, since I can't do any of them."

"As I began by saying, I have only recently come to understand the truth. It would appear that sorcery is merely the conscious use of an innate ability of all men."

"I don't believe it!" She shook her head. In the back of her mind she set up a list of acts beyond tind erspark and horsecalm, all of which had always been denied her. Certainly she knew no more than three or four persons, other than herself, who habitually carried flint and steel to start a fire.

"My colleagues were even more sceptical. After all, the idea threatens my profession's arcane reputation. But I have definitive proof. My new cryptic mirror, undoubtedly the finest ever made, is just sensitive enough to reveal it. If one finds a pair of lovers walking arm in arm, one sees through the mirror that they reinforce their physical contact with psychic bonds, of precisely the sort found in spells of empathic control. The couple's bonds, of course, are used to enhance love, not to enslave. A great general inspiring his troops before battle uses the same bonding, so each man in the army is convinced that every other man in the whole army depends personally on him. Of course, one with proper thaumaturgic training automatically strengthens the bonds, without realizing he's doing it, whencefrom the proverb." He let Elaine's thoughts take their course. To understand the works she read, she was clearly brilliant. Her tough-sounding talk was a masquerade, a verbal foil to the aura about her psyche.

"Which explains why people -- some people -- take fright in places where magic doesn't work?"

"Precisely. Wards which prevent active spellcasting can also inhibit psychic bonding. When warded, people no longer feel their companions around them. An inexperienced militia levy, shielded against battle magic for the first time, not infrequently panics and routs because each man thinks his neighbors are abandoning him. Even the most experienced troops speak of 'the vasty gloom of battle imminent'." He was suddenly touched by pity. "And you stand within your unbreaking screens, so none may judge you 'friend'. That is how you offended Earl Yoog this noon."

"Screens? They don't bother me!" She peered away into the woods. The trees were black shadows, lost in the breezeless air. The night was not yet cold, but now she felt chilled to her bones. Of course her aura didn't bother her. What mattered was what it did to others. She sifted through her memories. Each rejection, each betrayal, suddenly made some slight sense. Her friends had sought psychic warmth, and found wintry darkness. For a time she listened to the forest's silence, letting the clatter of their footsteps echo through the hollows of her mind.

"You may have a choice." Grandoon's voice intruded into her quiet. "You have considerable formal knowledge of the Art. You are probably able to open your mind, if you choose."

"Open my shields?" For that suggestion, she wished she had left him in Arburg. It would have been so easy to slip away unseen, to move in quiet solitude through the moonlit night. "Open? So any half-baked sorcerer can knock me flat with the snap of three fingers?" His argument had shaken her. He was right about one thing. She knew enough of the Art to see what path to take.

"There are compensations." His voice was a warm blanket.

"Compensations? For losing the better half of my armor?"

"Would you rather always be the one apart? Don't you feel the loneliness yet? I suppose that's more a problem when you're older. You needn't fear a sorcerer here; I'll ward us both. Besides, the loss isn't permanent; if you can silence your shields, you can recover them."

She clenched her teeth, furious with the old man. How dare he make his suggestion? She didn't really trust anyone that much, did she? Without her aura, she'd be at his mercy. Still, she knew who he was, who had trusted him, and that he'd kept that trust. Perhaps he'd been a little forward the other night. But he was famous for that, and he took 'no' for an answer. She didn't want to try, but what was her excuse? Was she afraid? Never! Besides, the whole thing was silly. She knew perfectly well she was no mage. Impatient, wanting only to say she'd tried and failed, she brought her mind's focus upon the Rune of Opening.

The Rune was a scatter of outbound arrows, the unfolding of a rose, the first burst of light through shutters flung wide to the rising sun. Without the slightest hesitation she found the pattern, subsuming its essence into her being.

Her aura shifted ever so slightly, like an attic door which had remained closed through the decades, its hinges slowly rusting into place until someone tried to open it. The movement as it yielded was so startling that she flinched. Then, angry that she had shown weakness, she forced the Rune's image into tighter focus. Her aura shimmered and faded.

It was as though she had been standing in a pitch-black quartz-lined cavern, and suddenly unshuttered a lantern. Grandoon appeared as a flicker of lights, red and green and white, wrapped in a shroud of mist. Grandoon's warding spell surrounded them both in a cerulean blue mosaic, whose tiles danced and whirled in an intricate sarabande. A night insect flitting above her head carried with it the faintest of inner glows, like a distant candle on a foggy moor.

"Grandoon?" Her voice trailed an echo as though her ears were full of water. What had happened? she wondered. What were the lights?

"Yes? Your screens vanished in an instant, but you're still hanging back." His voice had the same trailing echo. Then she understood. She heard him speak, then heard his mind, hearing their voices.

"Grandoon?" The name caught in her throat. She had read of magespeech all her life, but never hoped to experience it. She tried to reach out, thinking his name without moving her lips or throat.

"Yes, I am Grandoon." His lips were closed. As he spoke, their minds met. With his name came a flow of associations, of memories, of feelings as to who Grandoon thought Grandoon was. She followed his memories, recognizing the clockwork he was building, and understanding as automatically as he did how each gear and spring was supposed to function. She followed his gaze, seeing Tegel-La not as a mottled silver ornament, but as a massive ball of stone which whirled through the heavens without falling -- no, which fell without coming closer to the earth.

"I am Elaine," she answered. She looked at the woods, seeing them with a warrior's practiced gaze, showing him how to see trees. Here a man might hide. There one could take a horse. "But what are the lights?" She tried to emphasize the sudden burst of patterns around her.

"Lights? Those are... oh, I should have realized." He was slightly irritated with himself, in his usual avuncular way. "You must be united with the Presence, however much you deny it. Besides hearing magespeech, you have magesight -- at least when your aura isn't blocking it. Without your aura, you see with a mage's inner eye, perceiving the Presence, the power which lies beneath the merely material world. You even cast your mind as a mage should, very cleanly,

though you are still cold and formal."

"Formal? Cold?"

"Merely lack of practice. When I cast my name, you should have caught -- you did? -- some memories, too. With you, I hear your name, the way you hear it with your inner ear, but all I hear is the name itself, with no trace of your personality." Grandoon fidgeted, checking yet again that his more powerful thaumaturgic protections were all in order. She seemed to be without a past. Things without pasts, some of them, were nasty traps.

"I could, well, but your memories are so organized. I heard the things that you want others to know about you. What can I show you? Flattening those three thugs?" Grandoon caught a flash of remembered pain, of the speed and lethal calculation which let one normal blade prevail over two enchanted ones. "Or maybe the gatehouse last week?" With her question came more remembrances: faces staring up at a door which suddenly, unexpectedly, fell open; a dozen men trying to stand and draw weapons, only to be cut down as they rose; the spell damper, a device of cut crystal and wrought metal which deflected a mace's swing but shattered at the blow of Elaine's gloved fist.

"Usually people go farther into their own past."

Grandoon's observation was accompanied by a flickering vision of strange cities with impossibly tall buildings. "Perhaps some more spectacular feat?"

Elaine found her memories yielding to the pull of his words, bringing back shadows of battles fought and mountains climbed. It was no different than talking with someone, she thought, except that Grandoon knew what she was thinking, not only what she was willing to say. To have her memories exposed to a stranger's sight was unsettling.

"Perhaps something quieter? The sea? A Temple library? What you show should be something which signifies to you." As he spoke, images streamed from her past like dead leaves in a November gale, to be matched one-to-one by images of his own. "The lordlings of the Tressin are stunningly lacking in imagination. They work through their geneologies, beginning with their honorable parents..." There came from Grandoon the briefest image of a man and woman, most oddly dressed, in a palatial candle-lit dining room. Elaine's memories started on the same trail.

"No!" she screamed. "No! No!" Her aura crashed back into place, sealing her memories in and the world out. She bent over, hands pressed against her ears. The reverberations of her aura's closing rolled back and forth through her skull. Suddenly she was afraid she was going to be sick to her stomach, with Grandoon still watching. "No," she whispered between rigidly controlled gasps for breath. Before Grandoon could answer, she stumbled to the side of the road, finally leaning against a massive elm. Its bark, rough and slightly damp, yielded slightly to her fingertips. She shut her eyes and pressed her head against the trunk.

Grandoon blinked. What had happened? Now Elaine was back under her screens, clearly much the worse for the experience. He reached to comfort her, no more than brushing her arm.

"Don't touch me!" Elaine snarled, pivoting away with feline speed. She stopped a few paces into the brush, facing him, fingers against her sword's pommel. She shook with emotion. Her words slipped between gasps of breath. "Was that what you meant -- to share memories? You speak a few words, and ransack each other's private thoughts, their dreams and hopes? This is what people mean by love? It's disgusting!"

Grandoon was acutely embarrassed. He had kept the conversation to the most innocent of topics, the sort which most people insisted on discussing. Disaster had resulted. Of course, she had been reticent about her own past; perhaps he should not have mentioned parents. "No, Elaine, really," he answered, "you only let me have the memories you were willing to share. The others remained yours." He bit his tongue. His last claim was not precisely true. While Elaine's aura went up, an image had formed in her mind: a slender, well-built woman in blue and silver gown, her back turned, standing in a barren stone-walled cell.

Grandoon and Elaine stood, facing each other. Finally Elaine stopped trembling.

"Is it really like that when people are in love?" she asked, catching her breath. Her voice was a mixture of curiosity and loathing, like that of a small child asking if lovers really enjoyed crushing their mouths against each other.

"Contact between minds, save among the mageborn, is seldom so strong. Under your aura you have a mage's Gifts, so I actually saw your memories -- those you willed to show me. Moonstruck lads and lasses share the emotion of sharing memories, not memories themselves."

"Grandoon, I'm not a mage. Nor am I mage-trained, no matter what I read." Her usual detached calm reasserted itself. "And never again is far too soon, so far as sharing minds like that is concerned." She still felt slightly sick, but managed to hide her discomfort. Abruptly she turned and resumed her march along the highway. He followed, trying to deduce what had offended her. Was it like being kissed for the first time? She could have found the experience so shocking as not to bear repeating. Or had there been something specific, some particular memory she intended to keep for herself?

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